‘Peer Observation: a paradox of professional practice’

by

Carol Pook

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School of Human Sciences
University of Surrey

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Abstract

Peer observation is widely used within UK Higher Education (HE) institutions as a means of improving teaching standards. Interest in processes such as peer observation has risen as a result of an increasingly prevalent audit culture. Policies aimed at increasing levels of accountability in public institutions have contributed to the commercialisation of education and have been accompanied by an increasingly dominant managerialist hegemony. The Dearing Report (1997) is widely recognised for advocating increasingly professional approaches to teaching within HE and recommended a greater emphasis on both standards and monitoring.

This study concerns the use of peer observation in HE. Using the experience of lecturers in one institution it examines a number of issues concerning its use, specifically relating to its impact on improving standards of teaching. Using a narrative approach the study explores the experience of ten lecturers in one HE institution in using peer observation. Their narratives indicate a significant level of fear associated with the process.

The findings of this small scale study suggest that there are several reasons why peer observation is not universally used in the sector. Individuals appear to find peer observation inherently threatening and may go to some lengths to manage the fear associated with peer observation. There are indications that lecturers are fearful of peer observation data being exploited for managerial purposes. Individuals are resisting management espionage in the classroom because they are fearful of the consequences. Other individuals overtly fail to comply with the process altogether. Methods employed to circumvent the process may undermine the veracity of audit relating to peer observation.

Explanations for the levels of fear associated with peer observation reported in this study are considered and a number of recommendations are offered in relation to future policy. Further areas of enquiry are identified.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter one  From where has peer observation emerged?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A review of the policy context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter two  Peer observation: a review of the literature and an exposition of the problems under investigation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter three Research design, epistemology and method</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter four Findings and interpretation: the presentation of narrative data</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter five Discussion of the findings and a consideration of the implications for practice</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter six How should future policy reflect new insights into peer observation?</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1 An example of a narrative transcript</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter one
From where has peer observation emerged?
A review of the policy context

This introductory chapter is divided into two sections. The first part provides an outline of how the study has been approached and uses the structure suggested by Holliday (2007) to elaborate on the initial key stages. This includes a discussion about the general topic of peer observation and its focus here, how I envision the study and my own motivation for pursuing it, together with an indication about where the study is positioned in terms of the broader work to date. The choice of research setting and data collection strategy are also outlined. The first part of this chapter concludes with an indication about how the remaining parts of the work have been organised.

The second part of chapter one explores the policy context relating to peer observation and takes as its boundaries the Robbins Report (1963) through to the Dearing Report (1997). Word restrictions for this thesis necessitate certain limits to the selection of policy and other aspects of relevant literature. However a number of areas of particular significance to the study are discussed and their relevance to the context of peer observation is highlighted. Finally the chapter concludes with an indication as to the central research questions to be pursued in the study.

Approaches and structures
The focus for this research study is the experience of lecturers in UK Higher Education (HE) institutions of being involved with peer observation. Specifically it is concerned with those lecturers who could be regarded as ‘experienced’ in HE. The research study was located in a Higher Education institution in the south of England. The experience of participants in terms of peer observation is explored and analysed through the use of narratives. This exploration is intended to support a proposed hypothesis in relation to the implications of peer observation for the individual, based on the reactions and
explanations of participants. The study is not concerned with the actual process of peer observation *per se* but with the response of individuals to undertaking peer observation, both in terms of observing others and being observed themselves.

Many lecturers working in HE in the last 20 years will have experienced peer observation in some form. It is frequently used as part of the accreditation process for lecturers undertaking post graduate teaching programmes. Peer observation is often referred to in the institutional appraisal process for academic staff, in order to establish their engagement with continuing professional development. Peer observation is also a central feature of auditing in the sector, with institutions eager to profess that standards of teaching are regularly scrutinised. As such peer observation could be said to contribute to the sense of transparency and visibility of the institution’s quality assurance mechanisms. Of particular interest, therefore, is the concept of peer observation being undertaken as part of a wide array of strategies aimed at demonstrating quality in a university.

From a personal perspective the topic has been chosen for a number of reasons. Mason (2002 p 24) urges researchers to make clear their own position in the work i.e. ‘knowing where you stand’ both ontologically and epistemologically although she recognises that these positions may shift as the research progresses. Nevertheless I feel that this is an important starting point for the research and, in this section, I attempt to make clear my own perspectives about peer observation at the outset of the study.

The epistemological base
A full account of the design and method for the study is located in chapter 3. However, acknowledging Crotty’s (1998) assertion that epistemology should be the starting point for any social research, I am keen to identify the type of knowledge being focused upon and pursued through this study. In this instance the research is intended to address an issue relating to practitioner knowledge and in particular practical knowledge relating to pedagogy.
Pring (2000) urges researchers to study all aspects of their practice as teachers, everything that contributes to their work and lives in educational practice. Intentionally this research focuses on an area of my own work as a manager in HE; a role which has many facets but in which the development of staff, some whom are very experienced, constitutes a significant element. I find this a challenging aspect of my role but one which I am keen to develop. Primarily I acknowledge the role of my own learning in partly determining the rationale for the study. As a learner who very much developed a capacity for intellectual enquiry later in life, I fully embrace the concept of lifelong learning and recognise the value of encouragement and support from others in my professional development. Peer observation can, in my own experience, be used to good effect; it can be encouraging, supportive and developmental, not only at the novice stage, but throughout one’s career. Crotty (1998) argues for the need to clarify and take account of the value that might be placed on the knowledge gained from research and for whom that knowledge might be meaningful. Therefore the knowledge being pursued through this study is believed to be located in the experience of and is relevant to teachers and lecturers, particularly in HE but possibly not exclusively so, and specifically to their professional development. It might also, therefore, be of importance to those managing and leading teachers and lecturers.

While peer observation is largely used in contemporary educational practice for purposes of quality assurance (Hendry and Dean 2002), its use as a vehicle for personal development would appear to have diminished. My own experience appears to resonate with informal soundings taken from colleagues in that, for the most part, despite undertaking peer observation in pursuit of a quality assurance process, practitioners actually value the advice gained from those who watch them teach. More importantly it seems that practitioners also benefit from watching others teach, recognising that they themselves gain from viewing another practitioner teaching in the classroom. Such experiences appear significant and researching them acknowledges the importance of addressing issues of real meaning and concern to practitioners. In considering the choice of research topic I recognise the need to address such areas of practice rather than pursue what others have described as ‘trivial’ (Janesick 2003) and which have little relevance to the lives of the
participants. Others have pointed to the need for practitioner-centred research which has a clear role for the development of the individual practitioner (Webber et al 2003).

The research setting and data collection strategy
The research was undertaken in the UK HE sector, using one higher education institution. The institution, based in the south of England, is broadly representative of similar HE institutions in the UK sector. It is possible to recognise at the outset that the use of only one institution clearly limits the potential use of the data; necessarily it will not be possible to establish generalisations from them.

The data collection strategy has been chosen for specific reasons. During the period of my doctoral studies I have been particularly influenced by the notion of reflexivity in research and such an approach accords with my own professional background. The position of the researcher in the research is of particular concern. During the proposal stage of the study I explored notions of reflexivity and researcher engagement in several assignments, aware that I wished to expound this further in my own study. Concepts of reflexivity are acknowledged to aid the research process by affording the researcher ‘avenues into important spheres of knowledge’ (Doane 2003 p 93). While Finlay (2003) points to the contested nature of reflexivity the following has been accepted as the definition adopted in this work.

‘...reflexivity implies rendering explicit hidden agendas and half-formed intentions... this should be a continuous endeavour’ (Gough 2003 p 25).

My own biography would appear to be influential in this respect, having had a career in nursing and nurse education. Reflecting a humanist perspective, I sensed at the outset the need to incorporate the fundamental principles of respect for the individual in any type of research I undertook. This is surmounted by the need to engage with an issue which would be of use to individual practitioners, as Crotty (1998) urges, rather than of use only to me.
Acknowledging a feminist stance throughout the research I am compelled, in particular, to recognise the need for a commitment to action as part of the outcome, not merely the construction of an appropriate hypothesis. The chosen area of research reflects also the need to consider the nature of oppression in contemporary HE; in the research area there are clear implications for power relations and the impact of a managerialist hegemony and, as a result, notions of feminist reflexivity are significant to this debate and constitute an important central premise in which the research is located.

The context of the research is explained in the rest of this chapter. In this section the influence of managerialism in HE is discussed, in particular as it relates to the emergence of quality assurance systems in the sector, of which peer observation is but one. This discussion follows an exploration of wider educational reforms in the UK, particularly focusing on the HE sector. Clearly many areas could have been addressed in this section however the limits imposed on the length of this thesis required certain parameters to be established. Thus I chose to limit this exploration to include the reforms identified in the Robbins Report (1963) and subsequent reports, focusing specifically on HE. Societal and political drivers relating to audit are analysed as they relate to the study.

Chapter two includes a discussion on the nature and purpose of peer observation and will highlight a number of problems already identified with its use. The theoretical perspectives of peer observation, including definitions and various models, are also discussed and the role of peer observation in the audit culture identified. Peer observation is then positioned in terms of the current policy context and then the nature of the problem has been debated and summarised.

Having established the problem and the context, chapter three then addresses and justifies the methods chosen to approach this study. Herein I discuss the nature of reflexive based research and the ways that it has been incorporated into this study. The use of a reflexive approach in the study justifies, I believe, the use of the first person throughout the work.
The policy context

The Robbins Report (1963)

While contemporary discourse places great emphasis on the ‘Dearing Report’ (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, Higher Education in a Learning Society, 1997) in explaining the ‘demise’ of current issues in HE, I wish to begin this particular debate with reference to some of the educational reforms which preceded Dearing. Prior to 1979, a period popularly regarded as the ‘golden age’ in English HE, the sector was characterised by limited participation rates and high levels of institutional autonomy (Taylor 2003). Essentially it consisted of what Taylor describes as a ‘binary system’ (p 93) which included universities (demonstrating singular autonomy) and polytechnics (firmly controlled in the public sector).

The Robbins Report (1963, Higher Education, Report of the Committee) is regarded as the last demonstration of liberal educational policy and, while addressing issues of higher education (Lawson 1998), it has nevertheless been criticised for its failure to address the internal culture of higher education itself (Barnett 2005). While the Robbins Report is said to make explicit the philosophical arguments which support the societal benefits of higher education, the report also makes reference to the economic impact of HE (Graham 2002, Baber and Lyndsay 2006). The report aimed to increase student enrolments to HE and justified the proposed increase in the number of universities in terms of utilitarianism; the economy would be seen to benefit from a better educated workforce (Graham 2002). The price of this reform was later realised; universities became far more harnessed to state control which began to determine their priorities and development (Taylor 2002).

Lawson (1998) argues that the development of the University Grants Committee (originally established in 1919 and designed to allocate central funds to the universities) failed to provide a sufficient safeguard through which HE could remain free from state governance. Lawson further argues that, as the sector failed to garner a sense of corporate direction i.e. establishing the means through which it could unite and decide its own policy agenda, universities became undermined. One result of this failure was the consequent
reduction in their autonomy, previously regarded as the bedrock of such institutions.

Economic recession in the 1970’s gave rise to concerns over public expenditure on higher education. Baber and Lindsay (2006) note the increasingly centralised management of both student enrolment and funding (which reduced by 30% per student between 1976 and 1989). The period post 1979 witnessed repeated reductions in central funding and institutions were actively encouraged to look for ways to generate alternative income (Taylor 2003). Efforts to secure advantageous funding by the elite institutions gave rise to the Research Selectivity Exercise in 1986 (later to become the Research Assessment Exercise - RAE). The aim was to focus an increased proportion of funds to centres of research excellence. Taylor (2003) identifies this period in terms of the ‘sticks and carrots’ used by governments both to reduce funding and to increase student enrolments. While the RAE was used as an incentive in terms of ‘funding and status’ (Taylor 2003 p 98) attention was also being directed at issues of quality in the sector. As a result the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) emerged from a number of earlier guises (the Academic Audit Unit and the Higher Education Quality Council) to address what were perceived as deficiencies in what, up to that point, had been a system of self-regulation. The systems it designed to assess and judge quality of provision were regarded as incentives, particularly in terms of increasing enrolments but were judged as ‘cumbersome, imprecise and most important, excessively costly...’ (Taylor 2003 p 98). Subsequent revisions have made it a less burdensome process. What has emerged as a widespread approach to quality assurance has had profound effects on the systems used by universities to demonstrate quality and to make this demonstration visible and open to scrutiny. The result has been to remove from academics their role as the ‘sole arbiter of academic standards’ with a concomitant change to the ‘very business of teaching itself’ (Salter and Tapper 2000 p 77).
Educational Reforms – the Thatcher era

Graham (2002) provides a succinct account of the rise of the HE sector examining the emergence of the polytechnics into the HE system in the UK following the Education Reform Acts of 1988 and 1992. Previously polytechnics had come into existence in England in the 1960’s as part of the continuing expansion of the vocational sector. Thereafter their role metamorphosed into the established structure of university education, and they began to offer subjects traditionally undertaken at universities. Nevertheless their sphere of influence continues to change and current debates regarding educational reform suggest further widening with an even greater vocational emphasis (‘Working for Skills’, Department for Universities, Skills and Innovation 2007).

The divergent nature of vocational education and the then liberal approach to education in HE during the 1980’s is identified by De Meulemeester (2003) who notes the political imperatives aimed at reducing this disparity. The Educational Reform Act of 1988 is said to represent the emergence of greater centralisation in the British educational system, in which vocational education gained greater inclusion. Represented largely by polytechnics, the vocational sector gained further credence following the incorporation of non-university institutions into HE 1992, thus expanding HE provision to take account of the desired increase in student numbers. This represented the beginning of the emergence of mass higher education in the UK. In parallel with public sector administration as a whole at this time, educational organisations bore witness to changes in administration and governance which were far more reflective of the private sector. The emergence of marketisation in the education system following these reforms was increasingly apparent and reflected the wider neo-conservative political developments being pursued on a large scale. The result of such changes has been a profound socio-cultural shift which has had a significant effect on various accompanying discourses in the university and education as a whole.

What emerged following these reforms had significant implications for academics and students alike (Taylor 2003). The level of autonomy which had
existed previously afforded huge degrees of freedom for the pursuit of academic research and scholarship. The demise of the intellectual has been lamented by several authors (Smith and Webster 1997, Furedi 2004) as a by-product of the new university system. One particular feature of the 1988 Act was the removal of tenure in HE, a move which was intended to promulgate a greater sense of incentive for academics. Previously most academics had been afforded tenure as a matter of course; its existence had been a valued privilege which was seen to augment academic freedom in teaching and research (Taylor 2003). De Meulemeester (2003 p 635) notes the significance of this in terms of the effect on 'the cohesion of the academic profession'. This may, with the benefit of hindsight, be regarded as the precursor to a fundamental change in the landscape of academic communities.

The Dearing Report (1997)
The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (the Dearing Report) advocated a substantial series of recommendations for the future of HE in the UK. Like the earlier Robbins Report, Dearing can be seen to have comprehensively identified the economic and cultural benefit of HE (Baber and Lyndsay 2006). Addressing a widespread remit, one issue addressed by the report concerned the continued interest in increasing student access to HE.

The impact of student funding (being such a controversial issue) has received significant attention since the publication of the Dearing Report and probably represents a watershed moment in UK higher education. The report identified that the financial cost of attending HE should be increasingly borne by students and, in this way, a recognizable shift in attitudes toward the value of HE became evident. The value to the 'public good' was no longer perceived as the principal benefit of the opportunity afforded by HE. The value was now seen to be significant to the individual. As a result of Dearing’s recommendation regarding tuition fees, higher education came to be regarded as an individual private investment. The funding of universities, however, was only one area which the report addressed.
The maintenance of quality and standard setting received considerable attention by Dearing and represents the aspect of the report most significant to this study. In particular the report argued for the acceptance of threshold standards associated with teaching. The report noted that teaching in universities had been subjugated to research activities and proposed the formation of an Institute of Teaching and Learning (now the Higher Education Academy) in order to raise its profile. This new institute was intended to offer accreditation of programmes of training for HE, to undertake research and to provide an arena for innovation in education.

The need for threshold standards of teaching would appear to be predicated on an assumption that standards prior to Dearing were less than adequate. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, established in 1997, assumed responsibilities for standards in the sector, including audit and subject-based teaching quality assessment (Harvey 2005). However increased public scepticism about the standards in the sector (particularly since the inclusion of the former polytechnics) compelled Dearing to set out new measures of quality assurance (Tapper and Salter 1998). The Dearing Report was to lend further credence to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education by broadening its remit to include a role for quality assurance and public information, specifically through the development of benchmark statements, programme specifications and the standardisation of qualifications through the development of a framework (Gosling and D'Andrea 2001). Furthermore Dearing, although apparently emphasising the QAA’s governance, envisioned a system of standards, codes and thresholds relating to provision which universities themselves would be compelled to adopt out of necessity. The development of such frameworks would, according to Dearing, obviate the need for the close scrutiny of standards – heralding the so-called ‘light touch’ approach – by external agencies. Universities would impose their own standards and quality systems (Tapper and Salter 1998). The adoption of such approaches, which were transparent and open to public scrutiny, would be the price universities would pay for avoiding further ‘draconian state intervention’ (Tapper and Salter 1998 p 30).
The Dearing Report has received widespread criticism for failing to account for the views or interests of the staff concerned (Jary and Parker 1998) despite having a considerable impact upon them (Dearlove 2002, Furedi 2007). Its original remit was essentially to consider how UK HE should develop in the short to medium term. It needed to consider issues of student access, in particular addressing the extant economic imperatives which required HE to provide a suitably qualified workforce that could compete in a global market. Nevertheless its extensive series of recommendations has had profound effects on the lives of academics and this study will encounter some of those effects as it touches on issues of performance, audit and the role of the professional educator in HE.

An evaluation of the current issues

The preceding sections have attempted to highlight the changes which have occurred in particular in the higher education sector since the Robbins Report of 1963. Necessarily the specific implications for HE have been emphasised. However, changes in the compulsory sector have also occurred on a similar scale. Along with a great swathe of public sector institutions, education has witnessed the emergence of private sector and commercial ideologies (which emphasise the need for outcome, efficiency and enterprise) becoming dominant influences in the measure of their success. These trends have been likened to a religious movement with its own set of dogmas (Lock and Lorenz 2007). And indeed the instruments used to measure that success have also changed. Meanwhile, in the furor of what may be seen as commercial raids into education and the accompanying chorus of approval as league tables emerge from the conquest, one questions what gains, if any, have been made from such a challenge.

Many authors comment on the positive features of the Dearing Report. The concept of broader access to HE, advocated in the report, is widely accepted as an important feature although more recent concerns about how best this be effected continues (Reisz 2008). Taylor (2003) points to the effects of reducing government funding for HE as a result of Dearing, together with a greater diversity of funding sources now available. Equally he acknowledges that
there is now greater awareness of the role of HE in relation to society and the economy. Nevertheless the widespread dissatisfaction, particularly amongst academics, following the Dearing Report (and the subsequent policy agenda) suggests that, on balance, it caused more concern than it alleviated. Several aspects are significant to this study and are explored below. These are; the emergence of student as customer; the implications for the concept of academic freedom and autonomy and the demise of trust in the expert.

The student as customer

One significant consequence of this new relationship between universities and the educational market place is that the student has become firmly placed in the realm of the consumer or customer (Furedi 2007) and knowledge has become the commodity on offer. As students metamorphose into consumers issues relating to the quality of the product begin to increase in significance. The emergence of the student as 'customer' or 'stakeholder' (Lomas 2007) has produced a range of issues for institutions and academics, not least a greater propensity for students to challenge the organisation as a result of perceived 'poor service'. It is possible that the full ramifications of such a response by students, as dissatisfied customers, (and their sponsors, particularly parents) is only now beginning to emerge. Nevertheless the identification of student as customer requires careful consideration in a field as sophisticated as HE (Eagle and Brennan 2007). What is clear, however, is that following the Dearing Report and the consequent alterations to the funding of HE, academic foundations shifted dramatically. Furedi (2007) acknowledges the changing patterns of academic life, recognising its increasing subordination to the consumer culture.

Autonomy and academic freedom

In assessing the recent evolution of HE in UK, several authors note the impact of this process on professional autonomy (De Meulemeester 2003, Olssen et al 2004). De Meulemeester recognises an era which is now characterised by significant reductions in power and independence in academe. Others have gone further arguing that recent reforms represent the 'murder of a profession' (Gombrich 2000 p 1). De Meulemeester (2003 p 644) links the reduction in
autonomy to the increasing dependence of the universities on the public purse removing what was hitherto regarded as the sacred cow of 'objective independence'. Similarly Olssen et al (2004) have noted that changes arising as a result of increased marketisation in HE, suggesting a greater emphasis on corporate loyalty (i.e. to the university) has had deleterious effects on professional autonomy.

The increasing influence of external (to universities) policy is examined by Shattock (2006 p 130) who describes such an increase in terms of an 'outside in' orientation, recognising the diminishing authority invested in universities to direct themselves. The impact of educational reform on the curriculum is noted by Ranson (2003) in describing the ever decreasing influence of an autonomous professional community. Prior to the emergence of a 'neo-liberal corporate accountability' Ranson (2003 p 459) argues that the curriculum represented a 'secret garden ..... detached from public scrutiny'. In a powerful critique of contemporary educational reform Gombrich (2000) asserts that the very essence of professionalism in academe has been abolished as a result of the requirements relating to quality assurance. Similarly Blythman (2001) studied the effect of Subject Review (Quality Assurance Agency) and noted the response of academics to the process; such responses included resentment (which was directed at the system, managers and colleagues), the apparent reduction in academic autonomy, powerlessness and the perceived sense of fabrication attached to the process.

As the various external policy agenda have exerted greater power over the sector, particularly aimed at financial expediency, Shattock (2006 p 139) notes the rise in competition 'orchestrated by league tables'. The continued predominance of market forces and their impact on the notion of professionalism is examined by Olssen et al (2004). In particular the authors recognise the paradox offered by a system which increasingly determines professional roles through the use of 'a specification of tasks' (Olssen et al p 186). Apple (2005 p 12) similarly notes the ways in which the commercialisation in education has come to dominate the lives of 'the newly marketised workers'.
Professionalism and trust

Swailes (2003) points to the effects of public sector policy from the 1980s onwards which has been aimed at reinforcing state involvement in the provision of services. Emerging from this vehement and sustained shift in policy has been the introduction of quasi-markets in the public sector as a means of operational control (Swailes, citing Flynn 1999). Together with the rising dominance of a managerialist hegemony aimed at greater efficiency in the public sector (together with greater accountability for this), such change might be seen to have led professionals toward different patterns of behaviour. Examining the effect of this managerialist dominance, Swailes (2003) identifies the means by which this has impacted on the work of professionals. In an effort to assert an increasing influence over the success of institutions the concept of line management is now seen to exert much greater pressure than previously.

Frowe’s (2005) discourse offers a particular focus on the philosophy of trust. Of particular interest to this study is Frowe’s assertion that education at all levels is concerned with notions of trust i.e. the trust invested both in professionals and institutions in the education of students. Frowe acknowledges that this trust also implies a sense of caring and recognises that this particular aspect of trust (in institutions or professionals) is one of a tacit acknowledgement. Frowe (2005) also explores the concept of professionalism and, using Downie’s definition (1990), argues that the actions of a professional are characterised by specific skills and expertise and he or she is able to use or apply this disciplinary knowledge in considered ways. And, in making this consideration, the professional is employing discretion or judgement. Frowe recognises, therefore, that the professional is required to apply discretionary judgement and that this feature of professional practice requires a sense of individual freedom. Moreover Frowe (2005 p 49) recognises the implausibility of suppressing such freedom of judgement through prescribed propositions or specifications, arguing that the resultant position would be ‘impoverished, erroneous and misleading’.

The emergence of the notion of accountability in education is noted by Ranson (2003 p 460); the author argues that the ‘revolution in accountability’ across
the public sector, in response to reduced public trust, has had unintended and 'perverse' consequences. These include the relocation of trust away from what he terms 'internal goods of excellence' (Ranson 2003, p 460) toward a system intended to quantify quality.

According to Swailes (2003) the distrust in professionals is partly concerned with the inability of market forces to comprehensively govern their role. As a result the public sector has witnessed the development of increasing bureaucracy aimed at defining, monitoring and evaluating its success, under such guises as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The development of these agencies appears to offer a facility to appease public calls for greater accountability and transparency. In parallel to this increasing emphasis on accountability through transparency has been the emergence of a managerialist discourse in the sector.

The demise of the expert

Beck (1999) raises significant arguments relating to the demise of the professional in education as he analyses the contemporary work of Basil Bernstein, specifically focusing on the areas of changing patterns of knowledge and the marketisation of the knowledge economy. Acknowledging the effects of Thatcherite and post Thatcherite strategies on the autonomy of institutions of education, Beck recognises that these effects have included significant consequences for the individual. Acknowledging Bernstein, Beck (1998) identifies two aspects which are of particular significance here. Firstly, he suggests that education has witnessed a fracture between knowledge and the knower; a separation of knowledge from the self and from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Secondly and directly linked to the rise in managerialism in education, is the concept of 'short-termism' (Beck 1998 p 227), in which strong associations with traditional academic identities are derided as obsolete. Beck (1998) argues that in terms of the professional educator this has led to a competency based orientation, the standard of which is externally governed.

Herein lies the dichotomy. The implications of the Dearing Report suggested that HE required a greater degree of professionalism and yet, as a result of
the audit culture and managerialism, the notion of the professional and professional trust is undermined. Calls for greater quality in HE have led to the adoption of a variety of processes, such as peer observation, aimed at demonstrating institutional standards (Hendry and Dean 2002) while simultaneously undermining the notion of the professional.

The rise of managerialism

The emergence of a 'harder managerialism' has been seen to remove the autonomy of academics in HE (Dearlove 2002 p 257). However the reduction in academic autonomy is only one aspect of profound change being experienced in HE. The issues of marketization and the commodification of knowledge provide perhaps the most significant influences on UK universities over the last few decades. It is worthwhile examining in particular the emergence of this so-called managerialism and to consider the influence of academic discourses, specifically as they relate to this study.

The status of knowledge in contemporary settings is deftly identified by Edwards (1998 p257), pointing to its increased commodification and the influences of both rising technology and the 'dynamics of capitalism'. The global influences of technology, and an emphasis on localised, consumer orientated forms of knowledge, have contributed in part to a re-analysis of what might be regarded as useful knowledge (Peters and Olssen 2005 p39). These changes have influenced not only the role of students into consumers but have also subjugated the role of academic authority in favour of the market (Edwards 1998). Universities have, as a result, witnessed a fundamental re-focusing of their purpose which is now directly linked, through the forces of marketization, to the so-called knowledge economy (Naidoo 2005).

The influence of marketization in academia has had direct consequences for academic disciplinarity (discussed further in Chapter three). While universities may now be functioning with greater levels of democratisation (Edwards 1998), particularly in so far as widened participation, the impact of academic fragmentation and greater levels of specialisation (which have undermined the concept of the academic community), coupled with the consequences of the
competitive market, has forced the regulation of academic discourses and activity (Salter and Tapper 2000).

One further feature of this new-age of managerialism is the changing character of university governance. The 'replacement of government by governance' is discussed by Lock and Lorenz (2007 p 409) who identify the wider political influences behind this seemingly minimal adaptation, frequently justified under the auspices of 'public sector reform'. The reduction of the role of government, as a unilateral mechanism of control, has been rejected in favour of less centralised processes which are 'controlled' instead through market forces. Lock and Lorenz (2007) note that such devolution, frequently designed to confront an allegedly over burdened bureaucracy, has actually produced the reverse effect. Recognising the emergence of a state of 'hyper-bureaucratization' (p 405) the authors identify the use of evaluation, assessment and accreditation schemes as the most recent verification of a managerialist ideology in HE. Increasingly burdensome internal and external verification processes are offered as a rational justification for the extension of managerial power (Salter and Tapper 2000). Alongside new patterns of governance, therefore, have emerged various managerial schemes and structures associated with achieving and monitoring standards and quality, which are intended to respond to greater calls for accountability, as public trust in the expert declines.

The deprofessionalization of academics as a result of neo-liberal govermentality has given way to new chains of command more frequently associated with the commercial sector (Olssen et al 2004). A consequence of this has been the emergence of greater control through deliberate and managed approaches, seen as necessary to centrally define and standardize outputs or teaching.

Power (1997), in his widely acknowledged text concerning the 'audit society', refers to the new theology in higher education, noting the rising significance of 'quality, efficiency and enterprise' (p98) and their increasing importance in relation to university funding. While changing patterns of governance have transformed the role of vice chancellors into chief executives, and the
emergence of concomitant managerial structures surrounding them, systems which previously supported local self-determination have been replaced by more standardized approaches. Of particular relevance to this study is the concept of quality and how this has gained increasing prominence both in terms of the ‘product’ of the university and in how this product is efficiently delivered.

Quality itself has assumed the role of a pseudo-commodity and is seen as providing a means of managerial control (Olssen et al 2004) as institutions clamour for market position. As processes and internal structures become deliberately fashioned to convey a commercial ethos, with increased emphasis on the quality of the product offered, the roles of HE professionals become reduced and removed from previous processes of control. Power (1997) suggests that audit, as one of these processes, provides a means of demonstrating standards both internally and externally and, as a result of increasing calls for transparency, has become legitimised as a mechanism for benchmarking standards (central to Dearing’s recommendations).

However, in assessing the value of audit in HE, Power (1997) suggests that systems such as those designed to monitor teaching quality have, in reality, achieved little more than that, i.e. a system amenable to audit, and have actually had no impact on the quality of teaching per se. In an effort to achieve a standardization of product what has emerged is a sterilized process which is devoid of individuality; Naidoo (2005 p32) identifies a process of making the product ‘teacher-proof’ but which may ultimately diminish the quality of student learning.

As a result of the reforms of HE, some of which have been discussed above, universities have witnessed unprecedented calls for greater transparency. The effects of the audit society, specifically in relation to the emergence of managerialism designed to respond to the needs of external verification, have had widespread implications for the role of universities and academics. The deleterious effects on the boundaries of academic discourse, now answerable to market demand, are perhaps only just beginning to be felt in academe. The emergence of the consumer culture alongside increased scepticism of expert
knowledge has placed universities (with other public sector institutions) on the
defensive. This has occurred at a time of increased competition in the sector,
driven by neo-conservative policies aimed at widening access, increasing
choice and standards. What has emerged is the so-called mass higher
education (Scott 1998) with concomitant issues relating to standards.

Swailes (2003 p 133) argues that the emergence of a ‘class of professional
regulators, inspectors and auditors’ represents a means through which trust
has been transferred away from its original brokers. The result of such
developments on the professional has been profound. Swailes (2003 p 133)
notes that their reaction has involved the suppression of ‘altruistic behaviour’.
The notion of scholarship, alongside the parallel pursuit of excellence and
truth has been deemed self indulgent and irrelevant (Furedi 2004). Calls for
greater transparency across a range of institutions have been met with a
critical gaze in some quarters; of significance to this study is the work of
Strathern (2000).

The surveillance society

Strathern (2000 p 309) provides an eloquent and contemporary discourse on
the nature of accountability in institutions and suggests that there are less than
benevolent reasons for encouraging transparency in the organisation; ‘there is
nothing innocent about making the invisible visible’. The central tenet of her
thesis is that the motivation for increased visibility is based on the desire for
greater knowledge from those outside the organisation. In particular, she
explores the current audit culture in UK HE. The result of greater knowledge of
the organisation through greater visibility is assumed to lead to greater levels
of knowledge and, therefore, of control. Strathern (2000) makes clear the
distinction which lays at the heart of her thesis i.e. those current approaches to
audit which aim to test the performance and productivity of academics and
which conversely measure only the extent to which their performance
addresses stated performance indicators. Equally, and of some interest to this
study, is the fact that ‘performance’ itself is used as a marker of activity or
effectiveness. Strathern acknowledges the artificiality of such approaches and
exposes the paradox which becomes identified when accountability is seen to
be promoted by visibility and, in the process, singularly undermines the notion of trust.

Another aspect of her discourse is the position of control. As visibility is increased through audit, the locus of control (through the availability of knowledge of an institution) is moved away from the organisation itself. In addressing calls for greater levels of visibility or transparency one is able to question whether organisations, such as universities, have been swindled into a reduction in autonomy and freedom. Perhaps this is the point that Gombrich (2000) was so forcefully trying to make in his suggestions regarding the loss of professionalism. Equally, and of importance in terms of how one might approach processes such as audit, one is compelled to question whether the introduction of a prescribed set of parameters against which performance or productivity might be judged (such as QAA or RAE exercises) has not only stifled originality and but has given rise to a universal level of satisfactory mediocrity.

In relation to audit in HE Strathern (2000) identifies the contradictions in evidence as academics both deplore the futility of increased visibility and its associations with control whilst simultaneously acceding to the concept of accountability and undertaking (perhaps reluctantly) activities such as peer observation. One questions whether this reluctance (discussed by Shortland 2004) arises as a result of academics realising that such activities are meaningless in terms of quality (a collective resistance) or if this is as a result of something fundamentally personal to academics (an individual resistance).

Summary

Shore and Selwyn (1998) identify both quality and performance as exemplifying the cultural change in mass HE, particularly in relation to the student as consumer (Furedi 2004). Accompanying this cultural change has been the alleged demise of academic and professional standards, at precisely the same time that the Dearing report advocates the professional educator. As HE responds to calls for greater professionalism the very work of professional teachers has been reduced to a competency based technician for whom the
standardization of practice (and the achievement of externally determined standards) is the ultimate goal. Goodson (2003 p 129) terms this development ‘practical professionalism’ and argues that it has been used as a means of subverting and undermining university based so-called elitist knowledge (hitherto used as a basis for defining professionalism). Part of this argument is the assumption that, by increasing the professionalism of academics (including both subject knowledge and pedagogic development) the ‘product’ (student learning) will improve (Nicholls 2000). However, in educational terms, what appears to have resulted is what Rowland (2002 p 57) regards as ‘bureaucratic forms of accountability’ and systems, such as audit, which enable no more than a comparison of ‘product’.

The precise focus of the research i.e. the experience of peer observation reflects my own interests in establishing the reasons academics use for participating in this process or not. It is acknowledged that other areas could have been pursued and a different lens used to investigate some of these options. A study based exclusively around the psychology of peer observation might have been useful in pursuing questions of esteem and its relevance to teaching, for instance. A purely managerial study might have been interesting, to establish how different organisational systems could impact on the effectiveness of peer observation systems. However the necessity of operating in a reasonably confined boundary is acknowledged for the purposes of word length and this boundary is defined as ‘the experience of peer observation’; the intention of acknowledging this boundary is to remain embedded in the experience of those who participate in peer observation and to use these experiences to formulate an hypothesis.

The preceding debates have highlighted the issues of changing direction and alterations to governance in HE and the emergence of a new and dominant managerialist discourse. Doubts about the concept and relevance of audit and the role of peer observation as a quality assurance tool are, to all intents and purposes, of secondary importance to practitioners. Nevertheless, and despite some anecdotal support for its worth, there appears to be a limited acceptance of peer observation in many institutions. Discussion with colleagues at the outset of this study revealed a mixed picture about why this
may be the case. What struck me was the obvious paradox of working in an educational setting, in which the development of the individual through learning is a fundamental premise of the work, and yet the development of educationalists practising in the institution appears to be of limited concern.

The focus of this study

The following five questions emerge in relation to peer observation and these are addressed in the study.

How is peer observation perceived by those who participate in it? The policy context outlined above indicates that a number of significant changes have impacted on the professional lives of lecturers in the sector. Reductions in autonomy and academic freedom have been highlighted. The study focuses on the effects of such changes at the level of the individual.

What does peer observation represent in relation to standards in HE? The significance of quality has increased for those working in the sector. The rise of consumerism has re-focused the agenda of universities with concomitant effects on professional educators. This study identifies how this has been perceived by lecturers and discusses the potential implications for future policy.

Is peer observation perceived by participants to contribute to standards of teaching? Of direct relevance to lecturers is the increased focus on teaching quality. Peer observation is offered as one means of verifying the quality of teaching in the institution. This study questions the veracity of such claims.

To what extent do participants perceive a benefit to peer observation? Literature suggests that there are benefits from undertaking peer observation for individuals and institutions. This study examines the experiences of lecturers involved with this process and identifies how far the claims of beneficial outcomes are realised for individuals. Equally the potential benefits for institutions are examined.
To what extent do participants perceive disadvantages to peer observation? The literature, together with anecdotal evidence, suggests that there are also negative implications for peer observation. A reluctance to participate with the process is examined in order to establish if this is linked to perceived disadvantages.

Toward the end of the thesis several recommendations for future policy and practice are identified. Chiefly these relate to findings which concern the nature of the individual experiencing peer observation. Recommendations are made which attempt to re-focus power dynamics and which address concerns over documentation. A consideration is made concerning the preparation of lecturers to undertake peer observation, advocating an explicit preparation for the role. Equally the opportunity that peer observation represents in relation to teaching development is explored.

The following chapter explores some of the theoretical positions and problems associated with peer observation. In order to address the research questions outlined above this exposition attempts to isolate the central difficulties associated with the process and highlight some of the definitions and assumptions used in this study.
Chapter two
Peer observation: a review of the literature and an exposition of the problems under investigation

In relation to this study there are several issues which are important to scrutinise at the outset and which illuminate areas relevant to the research questions previously identified. Material is drawn from the literature to address several issues. Firstly it is important to identify what is meant by the term peer observation and the various theoretical models associated with it. Secondly it is appropriate to explore the purposes of peer observation through a consideration of both its merits and disadvantages together with some of the issues emerging from contemporary HE and which are seen to impact on its use. As part of this exploration I wish to pursue a particular concern, which is the apparent modification of peer observation from its origins as a developmental tool to its more common use as a vehicle for the auditing of teaching. Finally the chapter explores the relationship of peer observation to the individual teacher, specifically focusing on teacher identity.

What is the problem?

The preceding chapter outlined the development of a consumer culture in education and highlighted some of the issues, particularly for HE, arising from this. The concept of a managerialist hegemony in the public sector, with particular reference to the audit culture, has also been identified. While the 'transparency' allegedly offered through greater attention to audit and the availability of evidence pertaining to league tables, internal and external scrutiny etc. has been questioned (particularly by Strathern 2000), peer observation, as one means of internal quality assurance, has emerged as a “popular” strategy in the sector. This recent emergence would appear to be predicated on the assumption that peer observation strategies and accompanying policies in HE act to improve the quality of teaching offered to students and to improve student learning (Shortland 2004, Hammersley-
Fletcher and Orsmond 2004, Washer 2006). Nevertheless, while HE institutions collectively appear to advocate peer observation as a means of ensuring quality, the limited literature available to date suggests that, at the level of the individual academic, a wholesale adoption of the process has yet to occur (Washer 2006).

What is meant by peer observation?

There are several facets to this issue and I wish to begin this section via a commentary about ‘who is my peer?’ as this appears to be an appropriately fundamental point at which to open the debate on peer observation. It is unsurprising that debates exist, particularly in personal experience, concerning who can or should be identified as a peer. While it is necessarily imperative to consider this central premise, the literature is sparse in this particular respect, with many authors failing to address the issue altogether. However the question of ‘who is my peer?’ would seem important when one considers issues relating both to power dynamics and also to teacher identity i.e. with whom does an individual teacher identify in terms of their role (and their identity) and what might contribute to this recognition of ‘sameness’. The particular issue of teacher or lecturer identity is discussed later in this chapter.

The fundamental position of power is central to considerations of peer observation. The myriad of reasons for which peer observation may be undertaken (appraisal, the development of new lecturers, performance management etc) influences both who is involved in undertaking the observation as well as the perceived status of the individuals involved in relation to the process (Gosling 2002). Many authors refer to peer observation, as the name suggest, as an activity which involves colleagues (Cosh 1998, Shortland 2004, Washer 2006) and, thus, the intention being that participants in peer observation are regarded as equal in status. Shortland (2004) notes the position of power in the peer observation process, a factor which may explain the common practice of academics deliberately choosing certain colleagues with whom to undertake peer observation. Specifically Shortland suggests that the notion of this kind of voluntary arrangement is an important feature of peer observation when used as a developmental tool. The voluntary
arrangement and the deliberate choice of a peer (and perhaps the recognition
that particular colleagues of similar status may offer less threat to the
observee), lends credence to the notion that individual academics perceive a
sense of threat from the process or at least from those who might observe
them. In attempting to control certain variables (i.e. the observer) one
questions whether academics do so in order to feel in greater control of the
process or the outcome. Furthermore it suggests that academics perceive a
need to do so because there is something in the process of peer observation
which engenders fear or anxiety at an individual level.

The position (in terms of seniority and so forth) and activity or role of those
involved in the peer observation process may be determined or pre-
determined by the intended purpose of the activity *per se*. Various theoretical
approaches to peer observation are offered in the literature, providing some
distinction between these underlying purposes. Essentially three central
reasons for peer observation emerge from a general overview of the process
in HE (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004) which are; approaches to
managing accountability; enhancing teaching and learning through personal
reflection and improving teaching and learning through identifying and
disseminating good practice.

It may be argued that the position of power rests differently in each approach.
Equally the particular purpose of each one may be said to encourage specific
models or processes and the work of Gosling (2002) is widely recognised as
helpful in determining a number of theoretical models associated with peer
observation. Gosling (2002) identifies three different models – a ‘management
model’, a ‘development model’ and a ‘peer review model’.

Evaluative models are based in a managerialist discourse and encourage the
use of judgements about teaching standards. They entail an explicit power
orientation or authority being used *inter alia* for purposes of performance
management or appraisal. It may be questioned, therefore, if such a model
encompasses the fundamental requirements of peer observation as the notion
of ‘peer’ is open to debate. While such evaluative models may be used as an
internal process of quality assurance or performance management, HE
institutions in the UK have also experienced such approaches as part of external scrutiny. Subject Review, as part of the QAA’s remit for monitoring standards in the sector initially required an external assessor to observe teaching being undertaken in the institution (where internal mechanisms for peer observation are seen to be in place, this scrutiny is no longer required). In my own experience such events proved extremely anxiety-provoking, even for experienced academics, and provided only one or two teaching events upon which to base an important judgement against an entire institution (Gosling and D’Andrea 2001).

Developmental models are frequently used in post graduate training programmes for lecturers to develop skills associated with teaching. Frequently they may involve some degree of summative or evaluative assessment. As has already been noted, the position of the observer may not fit the notion of ‘peer’ in that the partnership (observer and observee) and is likely to consist of an ‘expert’ and, by definition, a novice. While Gosling (2002) suggests that this may represent a form of ‘peer’ observation, one may question how far this is reflected in the experience of novice teachers. However, and fundamental to this study, the development of the teacher is recognised as an ongoing process which continues beyond the post graduate stage, reflecting concepts of lifelong learning for the professional (Nicholls 2000).

The third model identified by Gosling (2002) is the so-called ‘peer review’ model which, as the name suggest, utilises a far more equitable partnership between observer and observee. Power differentials are said to be less relevant with this type of approach emphasising, as it does, the notion of mutuality in the process. Central to this model is that the outcome is non-judgemental but recognises the value of reflective, constructive feedback. Of particular relevance to this study is that this final model may represent a ‘true’ peer observation in that it can be distinguished as a process which involves peers.
What are the advantages of peer observation?

The benefits of peer observation can be divided into several areas depending on what is suggested to be its essential purpose. Firstly, and as many argue, peer observation is suggested as a means of improving teaching standards (Martin and Double 1998, Washer 2006, McMahon et al 2007). McMahon et al (2007) note that, prior to the emergence of peer observation, there was a general acceptance in education as a whole that the performance of the students represents an appropriate indicator of teaching quality. This would appear to be an overly simplistic assumption by today’s standards, recognising the enormous numbers of variables which are linked to student learning (McMahon et al 2007). Indeed it might be considered futile to even search for any recognisable link between the quality of teaching and student performance. However, mindful of the political drives for transparency and audit (discussed in the preceding chapter) it is evident that institutions are seeking to offer evidence of this link, however tentative, in response to increased commercial pressures. Peer observation is recognised as one means by which institutions might provide evidence that teaching quality is at least monitored; assumptions relating to its effect on learning will always be difficult to assess. The vexed issue of teaching and its link/s to student learning per se represent a quite separate series of issues which I would suggest lay outside the boundaries of this study.

While peer observation is seen to provide a system of quality assurance it is also widely held as having a significant role in the continuing professional development of teachers, in a variety of sectors (Richards and Lockhart 1992, Martin and Double 1998, Washer 2006). Of particular interest to this study is the apparent metamorphosing of peer observation, which is frequently undertaken in lecturer preparation (in which is it clearly seen to have a developmental role), into a system which is perceived as a means of quality assurance. Its role, as a developmental process, appears to have been usurped as a result of the managerialist hegemony and surprisingly, given the environment of learning, this appears to have gone largely unchallenged. Washer (2006) suggests that peer observation not only affects student learning but may also have positive implications for developing confidence
amongst new academics together with improving the skills of experienced ones.

**What are the disadvantages of peer observation?**

While the above discussion indicates a series of positive features of peer observation one is compelled to consider the contrary view; are there negative consequences of peer observation and, if so, might these account for what Washer (2006) describes as the 'patchy' uptake of this approach? If this is not the explanation, are there perhaps other reasons why peer observation has failed to achieve wholesale adoption in the sector? This particular issue has received limited attention in the literature to date.

Shortland (2004) notes the significance of apparent compliance with the process of peer observation in so far as academics are seen to adopt the policy without any real commitment to the process or the outcome. She suggests that, in her own study, there was evidence of completed documentation without any actual observation being undertaken. In this circumstance it would appear that academics are simply complying with a request to complete the necessary paperwork as evidence for managerial purposes and to demonstrate compliance with what is required of them. While not actually offering a distinct disadvantage of peer observation *per se* such an approach would indicate that HEI’s need to be mindful of imposing quality assurance strategies such as peer observation if the outcome will have little or no impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

In examining the use of peer observation approaches, the literature recognises the sensitivity of the material acquired through this process. While feedback provided from peer observation may be attended to through personal portfolios (Washer 2006), it is recognised that peer observation may also be employed for managerial purposes, particularly through staff appraisal. In this way the management model (as described by Gosling 2002) is used to effect a degree of control over the quality of performance and to achieve a specific standard, as determined by the institution. However, one questions how far institutions ought to progress the notion of standardisation.
Necessarily it could be argued that the features of a knowledge economy fail to reflect the salient features of a manufacturing process and the 'product' is therefore not possible or perhaps even necessary to standardise. Equally the 'standard', however it be defined, may be difficult to apply across the range of knowledge disciplines. More importantly and of particular significance post-Dearing, is the governance of any standards set. If educational professionals are encouraged to adopt the fundamentals of professional practice then, as professionals, they too must govern their own standards.

In describing the assault on professionalism Freidson (2001 p 180) notes that 'professionalism represents occupational rather than consumer or managerial control'. The consequences of latent managerialism on the intellectual freedom of academics are noted by Becher and Trowler (2001) in their seminal research concerning academic tribes and territories. As academic communities become both increasingly limited and defined by a managerialist hegemony, aspirations which were once singularly driven by intellectual curiosity and firmly rooted in disciplinary communities, have become constrained by commercial pressures (Becher and Trowler 2001). The reduction in expansive academic inquiry has been coupled with a drive for uniformity (Becher and Trowler 2001). Necessarily this attitude may be seen to reflect the widespread promulgation of a managerialist approach, in which systems of quality assurance are said to have infiltrated academic freedoms. The loss of academic freedom appears to be the end result.

Loss of academic freedom

The review of the policy context (chapter 1) identified the contemporary debates regarding the so-called demise of academic freedom. At this stage it is possible to explore what this loss of freedom might look like in the experience of academics and as it relates to peer observation. Furedi (2004 p 2) laments the loss of intellectual pursuits in contemporary HE, remonstrating with the apparent 'banalization of university life' and the limited aspirations of students to seek knowledge. Moreover Furedi claims that the activities of scholars in attempting to explore, question and examine a subject area are now widely regarded as solipsistic and meaningless exercises with little
application or relevance to present day requirements of education. Such attitudes are regarded by Furedi as indicative of a modern day philistinism which he sees as underpinning both societal and political thinking. Of particular concern are the consequences that such drivers have had on suppressing the activities and aspirations of academics. It appears that what was once regarded as their privileged position of liberty, which allowed for the unquestioning pursuit of knowledge and truth, is now constrained by an ever constricting boundary, as education is becoming increasingly shackled to the agenda of the knowledge economy. A significant feature of the current boundaries are indeed legitimised as a result of the mass commercialisation of universities, with the associated values of cost effectiveness, efficiency, economic utility, terms more readily associated with industry rather than academia (Shore and Selwyn 1998).

Systems designed to monitor production and manage the quality of the ‘product’ (and their related administrators), framed by an economic discourse, appear to have replaced the academic body as the government of the university. The members of the collegiate body are now seen to be subjugated to ‘increasingly coercive systems of surveillance, bureaucracy, government intervention and disciplinary forces of the free market’ (Shore and Selwyn 1998 p155). The emergence of the professional university administrator has recently received attention in the sector (Fearn 2008) with questions being raised as to the appropriateness of this ethos in academe. The diminishing position of academics on university governing bodies is noted by Macfarlane (2005) with Boards of Governors of post-1992 universities now consisting of only two academic staff members. This development is explicitly recognised by Macfarlane as a shift in the balance of power from collegiality to hierarchy. Importantly Macfarlane further notes the increasingly casualisation of academic labour, underlined in particular by the removal of tenured positions post 1987. In addition to the removal of tenure has been an increasing reliance on non-contract staff or hourly paid lecturers.

It might be considered that the reductions in freedom and job security through an increasingly bureaucratised university culture, with limited degrees of academic self-governance and restricted areas of autonomy, together with
demands for greater performance and conformity, would be a direct cause of elevated anxieties among academics. As they perceive a culture of invading commercialisation, with the values of commerce pre-eminent and imposed, it is questionable whether further ‘assaults’ from in their own ranks (such as might be represented by peer observation) would be viewed as sympathetic to the academic cause. It may, in fact, be the case that those who do comply with peer observation processes do so out of a sense of fear of the repercussions of not doing so. Failure to comply with internal systems might jeopardise their job security. Coupled with the removal of tenure this may contribute to an increasing sense of precariousness in contemporary HE.

Disciplines and environments: the shifting sands

Disciplinary knowledge is frequently seen as the binding force amongst academic colleagues (Martin and Double 1998, Becher and Trowler 2001) whereas pedagogy is less frequently used as an identifier. Indeed the subordinate position of teaching to content is seen as a devaluing force in the academy and one which is seemingly reinforced in the knowledge overload resulting from increasingly prevalent information technologies (Weimer 1997). However the erstwhile stability of disciplinary communities has been recently called into question and, as a result, the position of the academic may feel increasingly less secure.

The changing landscape in HE is seen to have had profound effects on professional identity and knowledge disciplines (Nixon et al 2001, Henkel 2002, Rowland 2002, Clegg 2003). Nixon et al (2001) suggest that this represents a crisis of professional identity with implications for both autonomy and academic freedom. Taking first the concept of disciplinary communities, contemporary literature regularly laments the demise of the traditional concept of a collective approach to disciplines and disciplinary knowledge. Rowland (2002) describes this in terms of increasing fragmentation as disciplines metamorphose and re-emerge as sub-specialities. Significantly, and acknowledging the post-modern, Rowland (2002 p 61) suggests that ‘the very idea of the discipline itself becomes redundant’. Similarly Rowland (2002) asserts that the diminishing role of the discipline as a representation of
expertise, necessarily impacts on opportunities for critical engagement informed by scholarly work. Such opportunities, he suggests, now only ‘revolve around mundane practical or managerial matters’ (Rowland 2002 p 61) where teaching may be discussed only in managerialist terms. Others have pointed to a relocation of research and education away from disciplines and into ‘domains’ (Henkel 2002), reflecting perhaps the shifting boundaries in disciplines themselves.

Secondly, and considering this rapidly changing landscape of the academic community it seems reasonable to propose that there are significant ramifications at the individual level, as well as in academic communities collectively, although this has received limited attention in the literature. Assuming that Rowland’s (2002) assertions concerning the demise of academic engagement are true, it might be posited that, in the absence of the academic ‘neighbourhood’, lecturers are increasingly working in isolation. This is difficult to ascertain with any certainty but anecdotal evidence appears to support this suggestion. However Rowland’s notion of an increasing level of specialisation might also contribute to this sense of increased isolation. Increased use of information and communication technology may also have an impact in this and I will return to this issue later. It might be posited that this increased isolation has reduced academe’s ability to resist external drivers.

**Academic identity**

One aspect of this study appears to focus on the perceived identity of the lecturer in the ‘new’ HE environments. Is it possible to elicit if, as a result of the commodification of knowledge associated with contemporary HE, individual lecturers perceive an alteration to their identity? Have the alterations to disciplinary communities discussed above had any impact in terms of how individuals feel about their position in academe, particularly as a result of increased managerialism?

In considering the nature of teacher identity, and with relevance to a study of peer observation, I am intrigued by the notion of performance, recognising that the work of the lecturer in the classroom may be likened to the notion of
theatrical performance. Indeed universities are suggested as being places ‘governed by performance’ (Parker 2005 p 151). Parker recognises the current managerialist discourse and its relationship to performance, i.e. targets, meeting objectives etc. However she also recognises the alternative meaning of performance, suggesting the concept of the ‘theatrical university’ (Parker 2005 p 151). In pursuing the comparison between the academic performance in a classroom and the artistic performer on a theatre stage, it is possible to consider whether academic identity is perhaps linked to this sense of performing. Is this a feature of academic identity which is important to individuals and, in using Goffman’s (1959) metaphor of the theatre, do academics use or recognise an identity as part of their performance? If this is so perhaps academics employ a particular role or means of portrayal which is part of their ‘toolkit’ as lecturers. Necessarily if academics recognise this notion of performance then one must also consider for whom the performance is intended and constructed; thus there is also an audience. A number of factors may be seen as relevant to this notion of academic identity in the contemporary HE setting and some of these are explored below. The increased use of electronic learning approaches through which academics now communicate with students is clearly one such development.

The divergence of peer observation from a developmental activity into a means of quality assurance

As has been established, peer observation has been primarily developed as a means of improving teaching skills (Martin and Double 1998) and it is recognised as a valid approach to quality improvement (Hendry and Dean 2002). Furthermore it is argued that peer observation, in using a collegiate approach, offers practitioners an opportunity for ongoing professional development. While the literature identifies several features of the peer observation process which may influence the future practice of teaching for individuals who participate one wonders if, in the climate of surveillance so prominent in current HE, its use as a developmental process has been subordinated by its role as a quality assurance mechanism. And in presupposing that this has indeed occurred, one is questioning whether
academics have continued to participate despite such approaches or because of them.

**Is there reluctance to participate in peer observation?**

Several authors point to a reluctance of academics to participate in peer observation (Gosling and D’Andrea 2001, Shortland 2004, Douglas and Douglas 2006, Washer 2006). Interestingly Washer notes the contrasting responses associated with peer observation and peer review of academic papers, the latter being far more readily accepted, even advocated, as a means of ensuring academic standards while peer observation retains an element of mistrust. Necessarily this brings into question the paradox of values evident when comparing teaching and writing for publication. Why is the review of written work perceived as acceptable, one may even suggest advocated and revered (being seen to add greater credibility or worth to the work), whereas the review of one’s teaching regarded with suspicion and mistrust? Writing, it would appear, is readily offered for external scrutiny whereas teaching appears to be shielded from the gaze of other academics, unless the circumstances of their intrusion can be controlled.

One area for consideration is the context of the classroom as this is the most likely context in which peer observation will occur. What is it about ‘the classroom’ that is important to teachers? Authors have noted the reluctance of teachers to allow others into the classroom (Richards and Lockhart 1992). Is this the only location in which academics now perceive a sense of autonomy and freedom, having seemingly lost it in many other aspects of their role?

One feature of this study is to explore this potential notion of reluctance to participate in peer observation. Several questions emerge in the author’s mind in hypothesising why such reluctance might exist. Firstly, and of particular interest in terms of the managerialist discourse, one might suggest that academics have deliberately resisted systems designed to audit and make transparent what has previously been cloaked in mystery i.e. what goes on in classrooms, as a calculated response. Is it the case that academics, in an effort to forestall what they may perceive as greater intrusion into academic
autonomy, simply refuse to acknowledge the need for such systems and therefore resist any engagement with them? For some academics the changing values of HE since its emergence in the market place are now in stark contrast to values inherent in academia and the former are perceived as invasive forces (Becher and Trowler 2001). As increasingly bureaucratic systems emerge in the sector the reaction of academics might be to deliberately offer resistance simply because they wish to exert a sense of freedom (Knights and McCabe 2000) from managerial control.

So – called ‘administration duties’ (covering activities such as mentoring juniors or contributing to university committee work) are often perceived as ‘non-core’ activities (Macfarlane 2005, citing McInnis 1996) and are regarded as unnecessary distractions from the important work of research and teaching. However such duties are regarded by Macfarlane (citing Burgan 1998) as crucial to maintaining academic communities and connecting them to the outside world. Macfarlane’s thesis revolves around the notion that academic citizenship is in decline as academics themselves react to changes affecting HE and that this reaction has had significant consequences for the nature of the academic community. Central to this argument is the exploration of what is meant by and what constitutes the academic community.

Macfarlane (2005) notes the three aspects of academic citizenship identified by Crick (1998, Final Report of the Advisory Group on citizenship, cited by Macfarlane 2005) of political literacy, community involvement and social and moral responsibility. The latter, while dependent on the first two, implies degrees of responsibility and obligation, including obligations to academic and professional colleagues. Importantly the demise of a sense of ‘community’ as a result of epistemological fragmentation, driven by a competitive market place in HE, is seen as significant in this loss of a shared community of scholars. Perhaps this demise of the academic community, and all that can be derived from it in terms of identity with other scholars, has driven academics into a position of solitary confinement in classrooms. This may indicate the possible reasons why they have become the sanctuary of the lecturer.
A review of teaching union literature reveals a cautious approach to the subject of peer observation. The Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) recognises two separate rationales for peer observation namely a voluntary approach for developmental purposes and a distinct approach to observation for managerial purposes. Unsurprisingly UCU (incorporating what was previously NATFHE – National Association for Teachers in Further and Higher Education) registers its opposition to the latter approach, suggesting that it is ‘unsuccessful in enhancing and developing the teaching and learning process’ (2000 p 2). The union offers a firm position in recognising the necessity for peer observation to be ‘developmental rather than judgemental’ (2000 p 2) and should be both voluntary and clearly undertaken by a peer who is chosen by the observed. One interesting requirement identified in these guidelines is the need for observers to be trained in the process; I will return to this issue later.

In stressing the developmental nature of peer observation the UCU posits the idea that the power associated with the process should rest with the individual academic recognising, as it does, the right of the individual to choose his or her observer. The imposition of a management focused process (wherein the power lays differently) is rejected by the union as the outcome, in terms of enhancing the teaching and learning process, is unproven. Indeed the UCU firmly rejects the use of peer observation as a judgemental tool whatsoever, accepting that its fundamental purpose should be purely developmental.

Peer observation and lecturer identity

If peer observation is seen to pose a threat to academic autonomy and also, perhaps, to the individual academic, one is compelled to question if this is concerned with the nature of lecturers’ individual identities. In order to assess the likely implications for peer observation on the individual I feel it is imperative to consider the way in which lecturer identities might be conceived and the implications for this in terms of teaching.

Several authors note that teacher identity has received limited attention in the literature to date (Martin and Lueckenhansen 2005, Day et al 2006). The
literature that does exist focuses primarily on compulsory education. Nevertheless, while the context is clearly different, it is possible to extrapolate from what is available and offer some considerations and applications regarding lecturer identity in HE.

Day et al (2006) note the importance of identity in contributing to inter alia a teacher’s sense of purpose, motivation and job satisfaction. Importantly the authors note the paucity of literature regarding the teacher’s sense of self or their emotional ‘self’. While their review of the available literature points to a dynamic identity, with certain elements remaining stable and others ‘fragmented’, they note the impact of a variety of contributory factors to teacher identity, both external and internal.

Kelchtermans (1996), in a Flemish study of primary teacher biographies, identified the emotions experienced by those who teach. Although there were positive emotions, there were also negative ones and in particular Kelchtermans notes the sense of vulnerability experienced by his participants. Focusing on this the author pursues the origins of this vulnerability which he recognises as significant and which ‘profoundly affects teachers’ job satisfaction and the quality of their professional performance’ (Kelchtermans 1996 p 308). Suggesting that the cause of this vulnerability has both a moral and political dimension Kelchtermans’ study makes particular reference to the individual consequences for teachers. In deconstructing the sense of personal self Kelchtermans identifies five separate components; self image, self esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspectives. Of particular significance are findings concerning the perceived vulnerability which arises as a result of the visibility of teacher activities in classrooms. Importantly the teachers in his study reported a sense of threat because their activities could be viewed from outside the classroom. Kelchtermans attempts to ascertain the causes of the vulnerability experienced by his study participants; what for them was at stake? Threats to self esteem were noted as a particular factor, particularly when a position was challenged from outside, either from colleagues or from external sources. Nevertheless the study recognised the impact of a number of factors which all may impact on an individual and which might provide sources of vulnerability. Kelchtermans notes the fundamental
place of biography, context and what he describes as a personal interpretative framework in determining the extent of and reactions to vulnerability.

Several authors point to the difficulty in separating the personal from the professional identity of teachers (Nias 1996, Day et al 2006). Nias (1996) noting the degree to which the personal self is invested in the work of the classroom, suggests that this may offer an explanation for a sense of vulnerability when the ‘self’ is challenged. Importantly she notes the reactions of teachers to any intrusion into what was perceived as their ‘physical or professional territories’ (Nias 1996 p 300).

The work of teachers is said to involve emotional demands (Richert 2002). In a study using metaphor analysis, Martin and Lueckenhansen (2005) explored the effect of teaching in HE on the lecturer. While their study focused on the nature of understanding of the subject discipline and how this alters over time (with concomitant changes in approaches to teaching), it also made significant reference to the affective domain in teaching. In exploring the relationship between knowledge and the knower the authors recognise the position of the lecturer in establishing such a relationship in students. Importantly the authors suggest the inextricable link between what is taught in classrooms and what is known by the lecturer. Moving one step further one might hypothesize that the activity in teaching is a representation of the knowledge being expressed by the individual lecturer. The authors acknowledge the significance of the affect or the emotions of teaching and learning – recognising it as ‘not an emotion free zone’ (p 410) and that challenges to knowledge (specifically the knowledge of the lecturer) have an emotional impact. Perhaps this offers an explanation of why peer observation might be seen as a threat?

While the literature provides suggestions as to why teacher/lecturer identity may offer some explanation for the emotions associated with teaching and may identify why the sense of vulnerability might occur, peer observation is clearly concerned to some extent with the notion of performance. Goffman’s (1959) definitive work on the nature of self-identity also offers an appropriate baseline for any consideration of academic identity, particularly in relation to
the concept of performance. Of significance to peer observation is his use of the metaphor of the theatre to describe what he terms ‘region behaviour’.

‘...when one’s activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression are suppressed’ (Goffman 1959 p 114).

Goffman (1959 p 114) uses the notions of front region, or stage, together with the presence of a back region or backstage; ‘it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed’. Goffman notes the change in behaviour when individuals move from backstage to front; ‘one can detect a wonderful putting on and taking off of character’ (p 123). Of particular interest too is his suggestion that organisations develop their own ‘social front’, with specific and identifiable stereotypical expectations. One may suggest that the commercialisation in HE and the notion of ‘shared corporate culture’ (Furedi 2007) only enhances the concept of house style teaching (with logos embedded into power point presentations etc). One wonders, however, if disciplinary knowledge also has something to do with performance; would one discipline recognise a ‘discipline specific style’?

Using Goffman’s concept of performance and region behaviour provides a useful framework for exploring peer observation and teacher identity. Peer observation would be seen to take place in the ‘front region’ in which the performance is given to the students. The lecturer is on display (as Kelchtermans 1996 implies) and the observer views the performance. In terms of this study this concept, of course, offers a sublime paradox; the audit culture, and all its sequels, could be seen to have rendered HE into an ‘experience’ of sound bytes, visually enhanced with the latest media and computer graphics – an experience driven by the commercial desire to satisfy consumer (student) demand. And peer observation may be said to have evolved into simply an activity to quality assure the nature of the performance. Product has been metamorphosed into a performance and lecturers have been adapted into devices capable of delivering the performance. Necessarily product has shifted from knowledge to the package of the student experience.
Summary

The above exposition has sought to identify several issues of relevance to this study. Firstly and fundamentally it is clear that the term peer observation is used inappropriately because there are instances in which it is undertaken when those concerned cannot be described as peers. This misuse has implications when one considers the situations in which ‘peer’ observation is used.

Various theoretical models of peer observation have been described and this description has revealed why factors such as power and status may be considered as significant contributory factors in the process. The manipulation of peer observation as a developmental process (particularly for novice lecturers) towards a means of quality assurance has been posited. The use of peer observation may be seen as representative of the insidious rise of the managerialist culture in HE which, through the deliberate rejection of liberal adult educational policy and the adoption of a politico-economic agenda, itself driven by the global marketisation of knowledge, has become predominant. In addressing commercial pressures which have arisen as a result of the marketisation of UK universities, new organisational structures have emerged, with an accompanying commercial ethos which appears to be at odds with academic ideology. Moreover such organisational structures are now incorporated into the governance of universities and traditional academic hierarchies have toppled or, at the very least, have lost their influence. The concept of academic freedom has, as a consequence, been condensed or even lost altogether.

In addition to the widespread political and economic changes which have forced HE institutions into operating as commercial businesses, the implications for disciplinary communities have been explored. The fragmentation of academic communities has been identified, with concomitant implications for individual academics, with particular reference to identity. It is possible to question the sustainability of disciplinary communities in universities if, as a result of rapidly changing organisational structures, academics are no longer able to identify themselves as a community of
scholars. One questions how far this level of fragmentation has impacted at the level of the individual lecturer. Issues of relevance to this study might include how far academics perceive themselves to be working in isolation and, as a consequence of this isolation, might look to peer observation for confirmation that their work continues to comply with disciplinary expectations. In contrast this study might also confirm if academics perceive peer observation to be meaningful to them as individual practitioners to some degree or, as has been considered above, if they simply perceive this as a management exercise.

In addressing the above issues the study considers the experience of peer observation focussing on HE and, using narrative accounts of academics, offers some insights into and explanation of these problems.
Chapter three
Research design, epistemology and method

This chapter explores the purposes of the chosen method for the study and the processes used to undertake it. It is my intention to examine why the narrative approach was deemed an appropriate method to studying peer observation within HE. Following this section I will analyse my own specific standpoint for the research, drawing in particular on the work of Frank (2000) in explaining certain conclusions about my own perspectives. Rather than trying to place these in abeyance in order to generate a false sense of objectivity, I recognise at the outset the position and the relevance of myself as the researcher within the approaches taken. It is necessary to start with an explanation of the underlying theoretical assumptions and positions which have been used to inform the research design. This will include a discussion of the epistemological stance and the assumptions relating to ethical issues within the study. Thereafter I describe the method and processes chosen for this study and the means by which these have been applied to the work.

Before examining the epistemological position of the research, however, there are several issues to consider at the start of a chapter concerning method. Firstly I feel bound to acknowledge the ongoing debates concerning both definitional issues (Denzin and Lincoln 2003) and with the criticism of subjectivity (Maso 2003) associated with the qualitative paradigm, chiefly in order to isolate them from this study. Crotty (1998) firmly argues for the rejection of the erstwhile polarised view of the quantitative and qualitative approaches and the accompanying rhetoric of the respective partisans. As mixed method research is gaining considerable favour (Hodkinson 2004) these competing positions now appear futile. Instead Crotty (1998) urges researchers to attend to issues of consistency in their epistemological stance and to recognise the need for constructing their own research processes that adequately rest with the purpose of the research itself, rather than striving to blindly adhere to the accepted prescribed approaches simply because they are accepted. Crotty (1998 p 216) suggests that researchers should be mindful of picking a ‘paradigm off the shelf’ advocating instead that
researchers should be conversant with the various approaches in order that they are better able to develop and defend their own. Similarly Mason (2002) acknowledges that qualitative research is inherently explorative in nature and, for this reason, she advocates a flexible approach which is not limited or restricted by *a priori* design.

Qualitative approaches have received widespread criticism within the literature (Evans 2002, Mason 2002). However the purposes of this study signify its central and perhaps intimate relationship to the individual practitioner and, as a consequence, this indicates a rationale for employing an approach which is located within the field. It is necessary to pursue the ‘truth’ of the problem under scrutiny through the interpretations of those concerned i.e. practitioners. The nature of the work, which might revolve around anxieties and scepticism of peer observation also needs to be able to account for such emotions and any methodological approach ought to be able to convey the complete array of experiences (Edwards *et al* 2004). Thus issues of objectivity become meaningless; here I am exploring the experiences of peer observation as perceived by those involved and it is not possible to isolate these from the emotional self. Equally I am bringing to this exploration my own experiences and biography. I am not necessarily paralleling my own experiences with those of the participants because I am keen to avoid any pursuit of either similarities or differences. Neither, however, am I trying to deny my own experiences and what these might usefully offer to the interpretation of the data. What I am trying to establish is a full range of experiences not just a confirmation that the ‘other’ shares an experience with me.

Secondly I feel it appropriate to explore the notion of the word ‘research’ in relation to the study. Pring (2000) provides an erudite analysis of the concept of research as applied to education. In particular he attempts to distinguish new knowledge acquired through objective interpretation of data and the growth of professional practice through reflection. The latter, he suggests, cannot constitute research, according to this definition. Importantly Pring notes the need for a critical community within which research is based and tested. Whilst acknowledging the need for focused and objective approaches to the pursuit of new knowledge, this study has emanated from a recognition of the
need for knowledge which is of use to practitioners. The emergence of practitioner-centred research (Webber et al. 2003) locates the role of practice as a central feature to practitioner development.

The inappropriateness and irrelevance of much educational research has been commented on by several authors (Pring 2000, Evans 2002, Denzin and Lincoln 2003). Evans (2002), noting the impact and ramifications of the Hillage Report (1998), suggests that educational research requires significant redevelopment, particularly if it is to inform policy and improve effectiveness. Specifically she advocates that research needs to have a greater impact at the level of the individual practitioner. Similarly Denzin and Lincoln (2003) note that the level of dissatisfaction with educational research stems from a fundamental failure to address the issues of concern. The authors argue that, from a US perspective and with regards to school education, little progress has been made. Lamenting the lack of progress Denzin and Lincoln (2003 p 74) champion the action of qualitative researchers who ‘have forced us to return to the heart of the matter: individual lives and how they are exploited in organizations on a daily basis’. The authors advocate that, in times of diminishing funds for large scale research, researchers will be forced into less expansive research methods. They will be compelled to revisit the written word, to use archival material and will find imaginative ways of locating and confronting data. Of course this is not to eschew the need for rigour and appropriate method.

The epistemological position

Recognising, therefore, the relevance of the everyday experience of practitioners and the knowledge embedded in their work, and in an effort to address the criticism that much educational research is meaningless to those in the field the first area of epistemology that I have considered is located at the level of the individual practitioner

Contributing to the notion of the epistemological starting point is a consideration of the value of the knowledge being pursued and for whom (Crotty 1998). Essentially the study begins from the fundamental assumption
that the complex questions of practice are relevant primarily to those embroiled within it and that researching these issues should be inclusive, mindful and respectful of their experience (indeed the recognition of the significance of experience offers the principal rationale for the choice of method). Schön (1983) refers to the 'swampy lowlands' of practice, recognising the intricate and complex difficulties associated with the roles of professionals in their working lives. Such complexities are outside the realm of technical rationality and, as such, this would suggest that empirical approaches are inappropriate to understand the nature of the lived experience of such roles. Peer observation represents just such an issue because it is far more than a set of prescribed actions. While one could argue that there is some degree of technical rationality to certain aspects of teaching, when we consider how we might undertake an observation of this activity it will involve discretionary judgement, professional opinion and, importantly, emotion. Therefore the nature of the knowledge under consideration is seen to be embedded in the professional lives of lecturers (or indeed teachers) and their experiences offer a legitimate area of enquiry for a subject which would have significance for their practice. While the value of the knowledge being pursued would be recognised by them in particular it is acknowledged that there may be additional audiences for the work. As a result of the impact of such a study on, for instance, continuing professional development within HE, one assumes that this might be of interest to those considering the quality of teaching and learning and also those concerned with staff development (managers, human resources etc).

Reflecting my own professional background (originally in nursing) I am compelled to consider how this has affected the way that I approach the study. In addressing this issue I am guided by the work of Frank (2000) who identified the necessity of recognising and cataloguing one’s own experience and biography as a constituent of narrative work. Frank notes that a standpoint is constituted by the political and ethical acts of self reflection. In isolating the implications of biography, experience, future aspirations and so forth, one is not only outlining personal aspects which may resonate with the experience of others, but also one is distinguishing what is idiosyncratic. In particular Frank notes the importance of a recognisable standpoint in that it
not only reflects the biography of the researcher but it also asserts their membership within a specific community. The use of a narrative method requires the researcher to make explicit his or her own stance. By doing so the researcher’s location within the study, in terms of context, experience and subjectivity become discernable to the reader and separate from those of the participants (Connolly 2008). The importance of an overt approach to ascertaining the position of the researcher’s voice within both the reporting and in the data-gathering is recommended by Mulholland Wallace (2003), who suggest this as important in order to establishing truthfulness. Frank (2000) describes the process of conveying one’s standpoint as a self-reflective one which provides the reader with a series of reference points against which to judge the context of the work and its position within the practitioner’s experience. Frank suggests that researchers should answer the question ‘what has shaped you for the work you choose’? He asserts that the process of declaring one’s standpoint ‘means to privilege certain aspects of what your biography shares with others’ (2000 p 356).

In recognising the forces and experiences that have shaped me, and in describing the choices that have prevailed in my own practice, I hope to position the rationale for this research study in such a way as to allow others to identify this for themselves. Immediately I am conscious that such a statement offers an emancipatory perspective and, for me, this reflects a fundamental purpose for the study and for my own experience as an educational practitioner. I have recognised the value of education per se later in life, having originally had a poor experience as a child learner. I believe, however, that this experience has had both negative and positive consequences for me as an adult learner. Primarily the positive features include a recognition that educational experiences as an adult can do much to alleviate what has gone before in terms of learning. Secondly, and perhaps more influential in terms of this study however, are the negative connotations that earlier experiences have had in terms of my limited self-confidence as a scholar. Although I attribute this to earlier experiences this appears to resonate with colleagues in my own field and I wonder whether nurse academics perhaps share similar issues of self-esteem when faced with more traditional university based disciplines. Although an interesting issue and
perhaps one worth pursuing elsewhere, this is outside the boundaries of this study.

Whilst some authors have urged educational researchers to accommodate value-neutral stances characterised by positivist or empiricist paradigms in an effort to demonstrate 'good science' (Hodkinson 2004 p 10) it is clear from the above that I recognise such approaches as neither necessary nor appropriate for this study. It is pertinent to recognise the Gadamerian perspective in considering the deleterious effects of avoiding prejudice, acknowledging its fundamental role in all aspects of human understanding (Roy and Starosta 2001). I am also guided by the assertions of Thomas (2002 p 427) who urges qualitative researchers to use this approach, suggesting that the appeal of such research is its inherent humility and 'modesty of aspiration'. Thomas recognises the relevance of the 'everyday epistemic devices' (p 427), their very nature providing the legitimacy and value to the conclusions drawn from researching them.

Concern for the individual, which I believe is the fundamental premise on which nurses should operate, is certainly part of the motivation behind my interest in qualitative approaches to research, but this also carries with it an ethical dimension, to which I shall refer later. Researching without engagement with the other person/s, without an acknowledgement of the benefits of researcher/participant interaction and without a commitment to action as part of the outcome (acknowledging a recognisably feminist stance), stands as an anathema to my own understandings of the purpose of legitimate research. Certainly I expect research to engage with a sense of humanity, not simply by adopting recognisable ethical methods, but by operating within an intention to help people or communities. Necessarily, therefore, I see my research situatedness firmly within an interpretivist background.

The justification for this research is principally derived from practice and I am mindful of the assertions made by Edwards (2002 p 157) that educational research should be 'close to the field'. Edwards makes clear the responsibility laid upon researchers to make meanings from practice and to use their findings (a) to inform policy and (b) to use methodologies to further guide
educational enquiry. In arguing for practitioner focused research she points to the importance of research which offers insights and richer understanding of accepted practices. Of particular significance within this chapter is her suggestion that educational research does not need to offer immediate gratification or solutions to problems. Rather it might offer something to future practice, something that provides explanation at a later date and which might be brought to bear on future policy. Moreover, and in support of interpretative approaches, Edwards notes the need for robust research which sustains ‘its own integrity and trustworthiness and (is) therefore open to scrutiny’ (p 157). Edwards (2002) advocates that educational researchers need to move away from studying evaluative practices but to concentrate on the complex issues with continual iteration within the field. This approach resonates with my own experiences of peer observation; it appears to be a challenging issue with several layers of complexity, reflecting institutional issues as well as personal and practical ones. Necessarily this subject has obvious application to a practitioner doctorate.

Methods and procedures

Whilst attempting to avoid a situation in which the approach taken becomes governed by a fastidious concern with method – described as ‘methodolatry’ (Janesick 2003), I have used Mason’s guidance (2002) in defining the methodological strategy for the work. She urges researchers to consider the methodological strategy in terms of the logic used to approach the research question and recognises this as a ‘dynamic, active and reflexive process’ (p 32). Thus I believe it possible to outline the logic of my approach as follows: the nature of the knowledge being pursued is based on experience – ‘what is your experience of peer observation?’ Knowledge is seen here as embedded in the everyday practice of lecturers in HE. Therefore any methodological basis chosen for this study needs to accommodate an approach which recognises knowledge in this way. While a number of possible strategies might have been used, such as action research or even ethnographical methods, I chose narratives because I wanted to account for a sense of democracy in an issue which, as has already been outlined, is embedded in an educational system in which individual freedoms are under attack. By using
narratives I hoped to encourage a valuing of the participants’ voices in what appears to be an increasingly oppressive system.

**Narrative enquiry**

Individuals are recognised as the primary focus for more recent approaches to research within the social sciences, reflecting a greater awareness in using methods which explore personal meanings and interpretations for and of actions (Riley and Hawe 2005). In describing narrative inquiry several authors point to the significance of personal (Mulholland and Wallace 2003, Riley and Hawe 2005, Connolly 2008) and co-constructed knowledge (Arvay 2003). As a methodology it has its basis in social constructionist and post-structuralist epistemologies (Arvay 2003). Widely cited in the narrative research literature is the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p 20) who offer a working concept of narrative enquiry as ‘a way of understanding experience’. Necessarily such a definition offers an immediate resonance with my own research question and the assumptions relating to epistemology.

It is recognised, however, that there is disagreement about definitions of narrative enquiry (Riessman 1993) and precise or standardized approaches are noticeably lacking (Rogan and de Kock 2005). Narrative enquiry has a contested history and criticism has been levelled at the position of the researcher in offering interpretation of another’s experience (Riley and Hawe 2005). Riessman (1993 p 70) notes the appropriateness of narratives for a ‘systematic study of personal experience and meaning’. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note the concept of experience being related to a moment in time (termed temporality) and the significance of context within that experience. Certainly their arguments regarding ‘in the midst’ research have significance for any study which is concerned with experience and therefore strengthens the case for using a narrative approach for this particular study.

Validity within narrative research is discussed by Polkinghorne (2008) who identifies methods used by qualitative researchers to address this issue. In assessing the degree to which validity of a specific knowledge claim can be judged Polkinghorne suggests that this is necessarily dependent on
assumptions made by different communities. While the notion of validity is rejected by some authors (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, Mulholland and Wallace 2003) because of its association with a quantitative paradigm, Polkinghorne suggests that judgements of validity should address issues of cogency and force of the arguments proposed. Within the domain of what Polkinghorne describes as reformist social science, validity may be based on individual descriptions and an inductive process which demonstrates the commonalities identified within human experience. Whether or not one accepts the need to reject the concept of validity *per se* because of its incongruity within qualitative approaches, what remains essential is a means of establishing the truth of the findings.

One fundamental concept of particular importance here is the distinction between narrative truth and historical truth (Polkinghorne 2008 citing Spence 1982). Narrative truth is recognised as being evidenced through the stories told by individuals and which represents their own personal meaning. Narrative enquiry pursues a level of understanding from the perspectives of those who share their experience (Mulholland and Wallace 2003). Through approaches comparable to literary criticism, the arguments drawn from the research texts (narratives), the means by which they are constructed and marshalled according to the research question, need to be transparent to the reader (Polkinghorne 2008). In this way the researcher aims to propose a viable set of interpretations which are cogently argued and ‘grounded in the assembled texts’ (Polkinghorne 2008 p 484)

Bleakley (2005 p 535) identifies particular methods of narrative enquiry that seek a comprehensive, ‘holistic and integrative understanding of narratives’. At this point I am compelled to acknowledge that my particular approach to using the narratives is probably an amalgamation of more orthodox approaches to interpretative methods, textual analysis and Bleakley’s concept of narrative research. Polkinghorne (2008) suggests that the accepted form of presentation of qualitative approaches, largely drawn from behavioural approaches (i.e. introduction, method, results and discussion), is limiting for narrative research. The dilemma of presentation faced by researchers using narrative approaches is further elucidated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000)
who note the difficulties of representing the full narrative text whilst simultaneously achieving some degree of generalizability. The authors suggest that this latter condition becomes obligatory only because of reductionist ways of thinking and representation traditionally held to be appropriate for qualitative studies.

**Reflexivity**

Holliday (2007 p 121) talks of the ‘reformed genre’ of contemporary qualitative approaches, reforms in which certain traditions of the social sciences remain evident but which now include a greater acknowledgement of the position of the researcher. Finlay (2003 p 3) describes reflexivity in terms of researchers turning ‘a critical gaze towards themselves’ and notes the evolving significance of the position of the researcher and other intersubjective elements within qualitative approaches. In particular she identifies the use of reflexive approaches as a means of increasing validity and trustworthiness of research findings. Reflexivity can be used to account for the means by which researchers can capitalize on their own presence within the research (Holliday 2007). So established is reflexivity within contemporary qualitative research that Finlay (2003) implores that we should no longer question whether or not it should be undertaken but simply how. Clearly acknowledging a postmodern view reflexivity can be employed in a number of ways within research (Gough 2003) including its use throughout the work as a means of persistent self-questioning. While such continual questioning and verification processes can also be asked of the participants the confines of this study both in terms of time and word length have prevented such an approach here.

Reflexivity in a narrative approach aims to offer a means of scrutinising the processes undertaken by the researcher and it affords a means of assessing how power relations are addressed and represented within the data (Arvay 2003). Ballinger (2003) provides a clear indication of how reflexive approaches can be incorporated into research design through the use of a research diary. She suggests that a research diary makes the position of the researcher accessible to the reader. Whilst a diary *per se* has not been in use in this study I have attempted to keep reasonably comprehensive field notes and
these have also regarded as data. These add a further dimension to the process and have been used to condense the context and process experiences into an account open to review, as outlined by Arvay (2003).

Within the work I have attempted to incorporate a reflexive approach in the following ways. Firstly, as has already been accounted for, I have endeavoured to identify my own biography and experiences in order to make these available to readers. I used this as a means of starting the process which Finlay (2003) describes (above) in terms of turning a critical gaze towards myself. The notion of a process of continual questioning emerged within the field notes as I progressed through the study and particularly during the time in which interviews were undertaken. Reference is made to part of this process in the following section. After each interview I recorded my ideas and noted the context of what had happened, my own responses and feelings as new data emerged and as I attended to each participant.

**Ethical issues**

Several facets of an ethical dimension to the work are worth mentioning at this stage. Notwithstanding the need for a proper approach to the ethical conduct of the study *vis a vis* informed consent and anonymity etc. which are detailed below, there are other aspects which are particularly relevant. Frank (2002) asserts the need for an ethical dimension to the research which dominates over methodology, suggesting that the moral bases of research should not be devalued by a preoccupation with method. Similarly Edwards (2002 p 157) urges researchers to be aware of their 'responsibility to the field of study' describing what she feels is the necessity that they be 'practitioners in an engaged social science' (p 158). Here Edwards is recognising an ethical dimension which reflects an awareness of more than the individual *per se* but also of the community of practitioners in which the research might be embedded or to whom the research is directed. In particular she suggests that educational research needs to acquire a greater connection between correlational and interpretative research in order to strengthen our understandings. Advocating a greater emphasis on the interpretative approaches Edwards (2002) notes in particular the responsibilities of
researchers in terms of their involvement with practice and their sense of agency within the communities in which they operate. I have attempted to adopt this sense of responsibility in the way that I have approached the study, recognising the potential impact of the findings. In particular I have been mindful of the need to identify specific aspects of the research which have ramifications for practitioners.

The study has been guided by the ethical principles identified by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2004). These note the essential components of an ethical position which reflects consideration of the following: the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom. In a similar way to Edwards (2002) the guidelines emphasise the importance of the responsibilities of the researcher. In considering my own responsibilities to participants I first considered the potential for what might arise from either the interview process or from the narratives themselves. It was acknowledged that the sensitive nature of some of the data might present difficulties for participants and judgements would need to be made during interviews as to how to manage difficult stories, should these arise. This proved to be the case as the interviews progressed. In particular I faced a growing awareness of the fear attached to peer observation. As I confronted each interview I became concerned that my own enquiry might provoke what was an increasingly emotional experience. This necessitated me making quite deliberate choices in how to encourage responses from participants. In this way I felt that I was remaining cognisant of BERA guidelines, particularly relating to protecting individuals.

The participative nature of narrative enquiry meant that I necessarily endeavoured to adopt a democratic approach within the representation of data, although the difficulties of achieving a balance between the voices of the participants whilst simultaneously focusing on the research question are acknowledged (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The collaborative approach outlined by Arvay (2003) is seen to further strengthen the intention of a democratic approach to the data collection, attempting, as it does, to convey a sense of equity between the voice of the researcher and those of the participants. Ultimately, however, Riessman (1993 citing the work of the
Personal Narratives Group 1989 p 22) notes the necessity for all narrative to receive interpretation however this is achieved, because the stories (or narratives) do not 'speak for themselves'. This position continued to provide a dynamic tension as the narratives were constructed.

Ethical processes were agreed through the committee at the institution where the research was undertaken and permission to proceed was received in March 2007. There were no significant issues arising as a result of seeking ethical approval at the host institution. At this juncture I have taken the deliberate step of not identifying the host institution; the reasons for this are explained in the final chapter but, essentially, they concern issues of anonymity.

Throughout the study attention has been paid to the issues identified by Edwards (2002) in defining responsible research. Clearly the work is practitioner focused and recognises the value of practitioner centred knowledge. It is from this knowledge and experience that the data have been derived. An ethical stance which consistently recognised the value and sensitivity of this experience has been pursued from the outset. Other assumptions or processes included; an open approach to securing participants within the institution together with a clear 'sign up' procedure involving consent forms and a participant information sheet; an opt out position was available to all participants at any time during the study, without prejudicing them in any way; the protection of the participants' identities at all stages of the study; transcripts have been anonymised by using pseudonyms; all processes required to secure ethical approval have been attended to and the study has been closely supervised throughout.

I was mindful of the possibility of exposing participants to a number of issues as they confronted the research subject. As has been identified within earlier sections peer observation involves a number of potentially sensitive areas for individuals including our roles and our personal and academic identities. Prior to commencing the interviews I was cognisant of such difficulties and considered how I might manage these if they occurred. As has been explained, this process proved essential. My own field notes were used to
detail how these were identified and my reactions to them as the study progressed. I felt that my prior experience in the health field, particularly in dealing with distress, assisted me in managing these issues.

**Approaching the data**

This study and, in particular, the means by which the narrative data have been scrutinised, has been informed by a process outlined by Arvay (2003). She discusses a collaborative narrative approach and describes a seven stage structure to using narratives as a research method. Whilst the method necessarily emphasises a collaborative approach between the researcher and participants Arvay acknowledges that timeframes may require the researcher to compress certain phases and she details how this can be achieved. Arvay suggests that the collaborative elements within her approach should be regarded as significant in terms of increasing the representation of the participants, rather that the interpretations of the researcher. However Arvay (2003) acknowledges that such collaboration may be a luxury which some researchers can ill afford in terms of timeframes. This certainly proved true given the time limitations of my own study and, as a consequence of this, I chose to adapt her process. Whilst initially I was hesitant about this I felt able to justify this as a result of Mason's (2002) assertions regarding flexibility. Essentially the effect of these adaptations has impacted on the collaborative nature of the approach to data to some degree; however I do not believe that this has had any measurable effect on the quality of the data obtained, nor on the representation of experience achieved through the narratives.

Arvay (2003) describes a seven stage approach to the collection and preparation of narratives. Firstly she identifies a pre-interview process which she describes as 'setting the scene', in which the goals of the research are explained to the participants. I undertook this stage through the use of an 'Information for Participants' sheet produced for submission to the Ethics Committee. Secondly Arvay describes the co-construction of the interview or performance, recognising this as an invitation for participants to tell the story, which may involve self-disclosure on the part of the researcher in order to initiate what the author terms 'authentic dialogue' (p 166). Thirdly the
interviews are transcribed. Arvay then describes a complex approach to the way these are analysed. This fourth step involves formulating a first draft of the transcribed interviews, looking at the words and non-verbal cues recorded in the field notes of the interview. As part of this stage Arvay describes four collaborative interpretative readings of the transcript; for content, for the 'self of the narrator', for the research question and for the relations of power and culture. Arvay describes the construction of a second draft at this stage, using a process outlined by Riessman (1993). This process looks for emphasis and specific story episodes and Riessman describes the mechanism by which these are displayed in the text itself. The fifth stage involves a further interview with participants, termed an interpretative interview, in order to achieve a collaborative interpretation of the text. The final two stages consist of a summary of the interpretations and then 'sharing the story' (Arvay 2003 p 172).

Time constraints meant that I was compelled to condense some of the stages outlined above. Participants were asked to read their transcript – a process more frequently described as member-checking. I asked participants to read their own transcript for content accuracy and to add, amend or delete anything that they wished. The same process of reading the transcript was also undertaken by the researcher and Arvay uses this process to demonstrate reflexivity within the transcription method.

While a further draft is described by Arvay time constraints prevented me from doing this. Arvay uses this draft to display the narrative text in stanza form, as described by Riessman (1993). This uses a linguistic approach to the analysis of the narrative which includes a recording of emphasis, tone and emotional expression. I attempted to include some of the non-verbal information within the transcripts, including pauses and laughter. I hoped that my own field notes would achieve some of what Arvay describes in terms of conveying the context of the event, including my own emotions at the time of the interview or surrounding it.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that narratives gained from the field (field texts) are looked at in terms of their meanings and social significance.
For this method the approach to elucidating meanings moves from simply a generation of text to analysis and interpretation. This section of the data analysis is part archival (in amassing and sorting) and the coding of all texts, including field notes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that this may not be a linear or step-wise process and several versions or interim texts are required. This multiple reworking and reorganisation of texts proved problematic, even if only in deciding at which point to cease. However, I remained mindful of Riessman’s (1993) assertion that narratives are necessarily interpretative and ‘require interpretation’ and on their own are insufficient to provide explanation. Details of how the narratives were analysed are discussed below.

In all ten participants were recruited to the study, following an open email sent internally in the host institution. Inclusion criteria established that participants needed to have worked in UK higher education institutions for at least five years, of which at least one needed to have been in the institution. This was intended to ensure that participants would have sufficient knowledge and experience of peer observation on which to draw. The intention was to recruit twelve participants however it became clear after interviewing ten participants that no new data were being uncovered and that saturation had been achieved. Thus it was felt appropriate to use only ten participants. Again this seemed to reflect a flexible approach outlined earlier and avoided the predominance of method over an ethical stance, in recognising that additional interviews would involve practitioners being removed from their work.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher and each participant received a copy of the transcript for scrutiny. At this stage they were asked to amend, add, clarify or delete anything in the transcript that they wished. Only one participant felt that she wanted to add something to her transcript, in order to provide greater clarity. All others were content with the narrative as it appeared.

**Generation of themes and sub themes**

Riessman (1993) notes the difficulties of a prescriptive approach both to the generation and the analysis of narrative data, recognising that there is no set
formula. The essence of experience implies that those who are re-telling that experience necessarily have a story to tell (Riessman 1993). How far qualitative interviews encourage or prompt ‘restorying’ (Mulholland and Wallace 2003) rather than the typical responses commonly associated with qualitative approaches is a matter of some debate. However, and taking a pragmatic approach, it is clear within the transcribed interviews, where participants have ventured into the realm of story telling or narrative and these sections are treated precisely as narrative i.e. the participant narrating the point in question. They have been used to illuminate their perceptions not simply as evidence to support the identification of a theme. I felt that the specific words chosen by participants were significant and frequently provided further clarity or emphasis. Where this was the case I have attempted to reflect these in the sections of narrative used to portray the experience of participants.

While Riessman (1993) identifies an elaborate retranscription process, outlined earlier, and the production of subsections for literary analysis, I felt that the nature of the narratives in my own research precluded this approach. I was not pursuing a literal reading (Mason 2002) but wished to confront the data for interpretative meanings. Each transcript was approached in this way, locating narrative and explanations; I attempted to inductively ‘construct’ narratives around the emerging themes by joining the voices of the participants together (this is what I mean by ‘construct’; all the responses quoted are taken verbatim from the transcribed data). It is recognised that narrative enquiry may be regarded as an iterative process, a ‘work in progress’ as researchers move back and forth with the research texts and the subsequent revisions (Clandinin and Connelly 2000 p 168). Central to this dynamic type of formulating the text is the position of the voice of the participants in the final form. I have been at pains to present the narratives in order that the voice of the participant, rather than my own, is positioned at the forefront of the work. The incorporation of field notes aims to demonstrate my approach to reflexivity within the work but they also provide a contextual backcloth in portraying how the work progressed.

An example of a transcript is provided as an appendix
Following transcription the data were organised in order to categorise and index the breadth of the material, although it is recognised that this process is not without an element of subjectivity (Mason 2002). Initially this was undertaken in a diagrammatic way simply to assist in establishing and visioning the extent of the issues under scrutiny. In this way I was able to distinguish the meta themes and then to sub divide these into separate areas or sub themes. This allowed me to establish the links between the sub themes which were then more easily discernable and, through a series of diagrams it was possible to explore the veracity of certain links as the texts were reworked.

Five meta themes were identified which were divided into sub themes for the purposes of presentation. The meta themes identified are: ‘threats, fears and vulnerabilities’, ‘non compliance’, ‘peer and power’, ‘positive benefits’ and ‘additional factors’. Each meta theme is considered in the following chapter, however it is important to emphasise that there has been no attempt to rank the themes in terms of either their level of significance (perceived by the participants) or through any quantitative approach.

Direct quotations are provided in italics and the participant is identified, using a pseudonym at the end of each narrative section. All narratives are taken directly from transcripts and represent a verbatim response. This includes, where relevant, an indication of pauses, repetition, laughter etc in order to provide an authentic representation of the narrative, including emotion. Certain narratives have been used more than once where they address more than one sub-theme.

**Summary**

This chapter acknowledges the debates regarding contemporary criticism of qualitative approaches. Nevertheless in recognising the need for an appropriate method which facilitates ‘close to the field’ (Edwards 2002 p 157) research, I have attempted to justify the use of narrative enquiry. The concept of reflexivity has been explored with reference to the literature and its potential application to this study identified.
Chapter four
Findings and interpretation; the presentation of narrative data

The preceding chapters have highlighted both the policy context surrounding peer observation together with an exploration of some of the already acknowledged issues. The notion of an audit culture and its impact has been identified as a specific feature of contemporary practice within HE. The literature review has explored the relevant theoretical perspectives on peer observation and a number of implications have emerged. Firstly it is noted that the use of peer observation is not universally accepted (Washer 2006). Secondly there appears to be some resistance to using peer observation (Gosling and D’Andrea 2001, Shortland 2004) despite recognition that the process has some advantages. The research questions at the centre of this study essentially focus on participants’ experience of peer observation and the perceived effects on standards of teaching.

This chapter presents the data derived from ten interviews. The narratives of the participants have been used to identify the five meta themes and these are presented below. [In addition field notes have also been used as a source of data and reference is also made to these.]

Ten individuals fulfilling the inclusion/exclusion criteria participated in the study with an equal ratio of males to females. Of these three had recognisable managerial roles within the chosen institution and some had considerable experience within HE. Whilst this may have had some impact on the data it is unsurprising that those with significant levels of experience in the sector held senior positions and it was in some ways unavoidable. Nevertheless I have been mindful of this in terms of the effect this may have had on the views offered. Participants ranged across several disciplines including business management, art, media studies, tourism, education and technology. While I was looking for distinctions amongst the disciplines involved there was, in general, remarkably little divergence in the experiences reported.
Threats, fears and vulnerabilities

The sense of fear apparently generated by peer observation was difficult to gauge before I began to engage with participants. My own prior experience led me to believe that the whole process generated a significant degree of anxiety amongst individuals, but how commonly this sense of anxiety pervaded the academic community was difficult to judge. The extent to which participants reported these concepts was quite disturbing. This study suggests that lecturers are frightened of peer observation. For some it is perceived as a direct threat and the process renders them vulnerable both as individuals and as professionals within HE.

In assessing the level of anxiety which surrounds peer observation it was interesting to analyse the words used by participants to describe the emotions attached to peer observation. I found it astonishing that participants were less likely to use words like anxiety, worry or concern but were more regularly (although not exclusively) using words such as terrified, fear and threat. This was significant in terms of adequately representing the level of the emotion attached to peer observation. Importantly, however, most of the participants who discussed fear of the process related this fear to colleagues or to a more general, widely held perception; for the most part they did not seem to fear it themselves but reported that others did so. This was intriguing. Participant Bev, however, appeared to recognise a sense of vulnerability inherent within the process and, while not using the first person, her answer suggests that this emotion was widely held and probably also included herself.

*I think some people are terrified that someone is going to say something that they don’t like [Anna].*

*I think some people are terrified of it …I think because they think – I just think an awful lot of teachers have this private encounter and this sort of, close the door – it’s them and the students and nobody needs to know it didn’t go well [Bev]*
Well I think it’s fear, you’re actually – partly fear, um because you’re actually on your own with students and you have your own style and you have your own ways of enhancing learning. And I think um for somebody to come in and sort of criticise – not criticise that but observe it and make comments about it is, it makes you very vulnerable [Bev]

One participant did, however, declare that she experienced fear and shared this emotion with colleagues.

Although some might think that people are too nice to each other to be like that! Um or, if they weren’t, I think that the other fear is, and I would have it myself, ‘what do other people think of me even if they’re not saying it?’ [Gillian]

The level of threat perceived by the majority of participants (or reported as a fear displayed by other colleagues) was unsettling and I began to feel a sense of ownership of this emotion because, in pursuing the study, I became concerned that I was, perhaps, inciting such anxieties. Recognising Edward’s (2002) assertion about responsibility to the community I became increasingly aware of the fear some of my colleagues were experiencing from peer observation, albeit that most participants implied that this fear was not their own but that of others. One participant was able to voice this.

…I have not been so bothered because I have always felt, you know, I suppose I have not felt in any kind of proper danger, in anything that matters to me, but I can see very much how that equation is worrying for some people [Bob]

As the study progressed I began to see the increasing extent of the fear generated by peer observation. My response was to become more acutely aware of the emotion my interviews might generate. In some instances I was aware of the need to avoid asking direct questions particularly about the origin of the participants’ own fears, despite recognising that this might have provided interesting data. This I felt reflected a sensitive but ethical approach
to a study which I felt was becoming increasingly charged with emotion. I was mindful to avoid generating further fears and threats.

I realise that I have perhaps, in the process of undertaking this interview, opened up something for this person; have I inadvertently heightened anxieties about peer observation? This bothers me and I decide to go back and look at the previous transcripts, wondering if there is any evidence of this elsewhere. It bothers me that I may not have sufficiently attended to this in earlier interviews [Field Notes]

I get an overwhelming sense of his feelings of oppression within the system; he is busy, possibly drowning, but he is helping me anyway [Field Notes]

What were they fearful of?

Intrinsic threats

Two separate sub themes emerged from the participants’ experience in relation to this meta theme; these were labelled as intrinsic and extrinsic threats. Firstly it was recognised that for some people peer observation provoked a sense of fear or vulnerability as an individual. For some this was recognised as something intrinsic to the nature of the work, as in the quote (above) from Bev, i.e. something that had implications for the way one chose to portray oneself in the classroom. Here she depicted the classroom as the domain of the lecturer (she used the expression ‘to come in’) and the narrative implied a sense of invasion when it was entered by another; this analogy (which I have termed ‘territory’) appeared elsewhere and merited a subcategory in its own right. It appeared that the presence of someone else in that space or territory was perceived as threatening, regardless of what they were doing there. Paradoxically the use of team teaching approaches was mentioned by many participants who used this as an alternative strategy to peer observation. Although this is considered elsewhere in more detail it is interesting to note the conflicting experiences of the ‘sanctity’ or sanctuary of the classroom. Equally others reported a threat to self-esteem or professional
reputation and, again, there was a sense of an intrinsic personal threat. If this notion of threat arose in narratives participants were asked of what they thought lecturers were fearful.

*It threatens self-esteem, it threatens their, I suppose ultimately people perhaps feel insecure about their jobs [Phil]*

*Now, the way I see it is that when you do those two things a set of risks occur, and basically I reckon those risks, to sort of crystallise them, are at the sort of first level, a risk to the relationship with that other person and potentially beyond that, particularly a relationship between the person who is being observed and the person who is observing, and also (so a risk to the relationship), and a risk to reputation. However narrow that risk might be retained by, if you like, the structure of confidentiality, whatever. And then at the level beyond that, the risk to the way you view yourself as a teacher and then knock on as a person etcetera [Bob]*

*Yes, and ‘who am I, I thought I was a good teacher blah, blah blah’ or whatever, and so, to put it at its simplest, the way I see it is that there will inevitably be a reluctance to get too involved in this kind of work, amongst some teachers, some of the time. Alright? And the extent to.. the benefit of a scheme offering protections, is that it gives so alleviation the sense of risk, but in the end, that sense of risk is so complex (because how we view risk ourselves and how we interpret risk, and how we are willing to take risk) depends on so many things [Bob]*

*Well, to me it threatens those three things, which is my relationship with the person who I am working with directly, whether this is the observer or the observed, it threatens the relationship between the two; it threatens the reputation of the observed and potentially of the observer, more widely in the group (and the department or whatever) and certainly with that other person; and then the overriding threat is to, which is much more serious, is the potential threat to who I thought*
I was a teacher and maybe even more than that, who I thought I was full stop [Bob]

I think it’s the fear of somebody not finding you perfect. I think it’s the fear that somebody might think you’re not very good maybe [Anna]

There is a sort of a resistance and this point about it – you feel very vulnerable and I think it’s hitting at the core of what you do...[Bev]

I quite simply think people are dreadfully fearful that they might be criticised [Gillian]

Failure [Gillian]

It became apparent that the sense of vulnerability was more widespread than I had initially anticipated. Almost every participant verified this to some extent. An entry in the Field Notes identified the moment when I started to reflect on this particular finding and consider the implications for the work.

When I review the transcript I am pleased but slightly shocked at what I see. It is clear that there is a significant personal dimension to the notion of fear. The term vulnerability is used by me quite early on and is readily corroborated by the participant. This helps me think about the title of this meta theme [Field Notes]

In parallel to this growing awareness I realised that I had also begun to question my own location in the study, perhaps because I had started to appreciate the extent of the findings and the potential ramifications. In terms of turning the critical gaze inward (Finlay 2003) my field notes reflected how this started to become demonstrable. After several interviews I questioned whether I was adequately qualified to work with the data I was collecting.

Once again I feel like I am being looked down on from a more traditional discipline. Happily I don’t think that she really knows who I am. But my old fears reappear – not academic enough [Field Notes]
I am not scholarly and don't see things quite the same. And yet some of what he is saying about teaching I realise reflects the novice, this makes me feel better [Field Notes]

In one interview, however, I noted a deeper sense of compatibility with the participant which reaffirmed and justified my ability to undertake the work. It appeared to verify that this was practitioner-centred research.

This interview was joyous in lots of ways, we laughed out loud a lot. We were interrupted once, but we carried on…… So much came out of it. But she maintained a value neutral stance; didn't come down one side or the other, but reflected real reasons why peer observation, in ______________ [ISL'], may not be appropriate [Field Notes]

Other aspects for consideration emerged through the narratives including the issue of the peer relationship and its impact on this process, as Bob succinctly identifies (above). I have attended to these issues separately (see 'Peer and Power').

Extrinsic threats

Secondly there appeared to be a recognition that there was also a fear of something extraneous to oneself as an individual or lecturer, something much more tangible but unrelated to the self. Reflecting a fear of external scrutiny (and the possible consequences of this) several participants thought others felt that their jobs were under threat as a result of a poor peer observation result, although many acknowledged that this fear was misplaced. The intrinsic and extrinsic sub themes were frequently mentioned together (see Phil's comments above) but it was clear that if a peer observation revealed less than satisfactory outcome then participants felt that there may be professional ramifications.

2 In order to preserve anonymity I have chosen to remove any references made which might identify the institution and this is labelled as 'Institution Specific Language' (ISL).
...they feel that peer observation might show up their shortcomings, which might ultimately lead to their dismissal. Now that is highly unlikely to happen, I mean because, and of course being a confidential system it doesn’t anyway, but, none the less, I think that’s what people are afraid of. [Phil]

Equally the use of peer observation as a covert approach to performance management was highlighted by several participants. For some this was perceived as the central reason for it to be seen as threatening, particularly if this was then related to remuneration. Participants made reference to colleagues’ wariness of managerial interference and peer observation being perceived as unjustified, intrusive or directly threatening.

What people would really fear would be that peer observation would become part of the management process, that it would be linked to appraisal and it would be linked to their salary. So there would be a direct connection between their performance in the classroom and how much money they took home at the end of the month [Phil]

If people are convinced that it’s a good idea they’ll be more likely to do it than if they’ve got these anxieties about, like you say, it being a quality assurance tool, a management tool, um, a way of people spying on us and possibly using that intelligence about how good or bad we are as a teacher, um in a detrimental way against us. [Jack]

I don’t think you’ll ever shake off that suspicion of the possibility that the observation of teaching, peer observation could be misused or abused [Jack].

I think some people of the old school may see at something quite negative and a big brother approach [Anna]

I think that at the root of all of this is people’s inherent suspicion about what the process is actually about in the first place [Gillian]
Well I think in the kind of current environment and I think it would be a fear of ‘does this get recorded anywhere and is this likely to lead to me in some way being seen not to have met certain expected outcomes – in terms of performance?’ So a performance indicator. [Gillian]

Classroom as sanctuary and territory

One additional element of this first meta theme was the notion of the classroom as sanctuary and territory. As I confronted the data I started to realise the ways in which individuals were attempting to manage the risks and fears they perceived from peer observation. One obvious way to control some of the potential threat was to choose the person who acted as observer. This notion of the ‘buddy observer’ is discussed in the next meta theme. However one other element associated with this threat is also the idea that the lecturer used his or her classroom as a sanctuary and peer observation may be perceived as a threat because it is seen to invade this personal territory created by the lecturer for his or her performance. I found this a profoundly interesting concept but one which seemed to offer several subtle explanations for why lecturers might choose to vigorously guard this space. Actions taken to preserve this sense of territory might, therefore, represent a rationale for non compliance. Some of the references to this private space were subtle, as in the narrative of Anna (below). However, as the study progressed, I realised that these references were necessarily likely to be subtle ones, perhaps even veiled, such was the nature of the study

… private encounter between them and the classroom. And they don’t see it as a need to open it up [Anna].

Yes, it’s somebody else’s territory isn’t it? [Gillian]

– there is a sense in which that’s your territory [Gavin]
Non-compliance

The study indicated significant reluctance on the part of some lecturers to participate in peer observation. The following section suggests that there are a number of reasons which might explain the level of non-compliance perceived by the participants. None of those interviewed for the study labelled themselves as non compliers. Obviously it would have been desirable to pursue issues of non-compliance with those who refused to take part, in order to gain first hand narratives, however no such person came forward. The level of non-compliance was difficult to judge at the outset however one participant [Gillian], in a managerial position, suggested that peer observation was not happening to any great extent within her faculty.

So there’s probably people who do it rarely and some people who do it quite a lot in a formal/informal way [Mike]

I’m aware of people that never do it [Anna]

But um I don’t think it’s been happening half as widely as people would like everybody else to think. Not from my experience [Gillian]

Several sub themes emerged under the heading of non-compliance and it was a matter of some debate about which particular category was most appropriate for each issue. However, non-compliance appeared to be significant as most participants related something about this within their narratives (this proved more meaningful for those in managerial positions; their level of frustration was evident, not because they wished to use the process for managerial purposes but simply because they could not get staff to engage). If one regards the use of informal approaches (as opposed to the prescribed process) as also representative of non-compliance then this would suggest that few individuals had undertaken or were undertaking peer observation at all. Participants readily acknowledged the lack of compliance with the peer observation process within the institution. I was most interested in distinguishing why this might be the case rather than coming to a precise statistic regarding the level of non-compliance per se.
Two major sub themes have been distinguished in relation to non-compliance. Firstly it was necessary to explore the first sub theme, that of deliberate resistance and the possible reasons for it and, secondly, other reasons why peer observation was not occurring but which were felt, in the experience of the participants, to be incidental or contextual rather than deliberate (labelled ‘incidental non-compliance’). Participants were readily able to identify colleagues who deliberately resisted involvement with peer observation. I labelled these ‘known offenders’ because almost all participants mentioned them in these or similar terms. What was of particular interest were the reasons cited for deliberate non-compliance.

Deliberate non-compliance; the effect of known offenders

The perception of threat or risk, as outlined above, offers a significant explanation for deliberate non-compliance. The data would appear to support an assumption that known offenders resisted involvement because they felt it posed some form of personal threat. However it was not possible to establish a causal relationship between this threat and non-compliance without directly questioning a known offender. Looking at the first sub theme it was clear that participants knew of those who deliberately resisted peer observation. Their narratives suggest that known offenders resisted for several possible reasons. Firstly there appeared to be a fundamental fear of exposure (although it is acknowledged that, in one case, this was an inference by one participant about a colleague).

*I mean there is a member of staff who I shall not name who, when told that peer observation was going to be undertaken by everybody, refused point blank to take part on the grounds that there was nothing anyone could tell him about how to teach … I feel that that was actually really the result of a deep-seated insecurity about his own ability as a teacher, which he felt would be exposed if peer observation were allowed to take place on him [Phil]*
I’m aware of people that never do it ....I think it’s probably some people who are a bit jaded about teaching in general and some people who um – yeah, they see it as a private encounter between them and the classroom. And they don’t see it as a need to open it up and it’s not something they would welcome or want [Anna]

It appeared that for some participants their experience led them to believe that, at some level, deliberate non-compliance was directly caused by the instigation of a process of peer observation within the institution.

... but the fact it’s been imposed in some way or controlled in some way doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s being done for the right reasons and it’s necessarily as effective as it might have been if it had been self motivated by the staff themselves [Jack]

... because as soon it’s institutional driven, then it is a compliance issue. And that’s when people rebel. I think people don’t like – I think a lot of people are in teaching and lecturing because they like autonomy and the freedom. And consequently um anything that requires them to comply, it’s a little bit like when deadlines are set for exam papers to be in, you know people go ‘well I was doing it that week anyway’. It becomes this big sort of – I think it’s the wrong emphasis [Anna]

As soon as it was made mandatory people just said ‘sod that’ and they treated it as – they did it but it was strategic compliance. ‘Oh right, we’ve got to do this, I’ll do it to you, you do it to me....we’ll fudge it’ [Gavin]

The number of references made to non-compliance was unanticipated. Whilst I had suspected some reference to this my notes indicate my reactions after the first interview.

But it confirms that my suspicions about compliance, non-compliance and fear appear to be important themes. What he says resonates with
my suspicions and that makes me more secure in what I am asking during the interview [Field Notes]

In recognising the way the peer observation process had been developed as a non-compulsory institutional initiative one participant voiced the following.

But people who didn’t want to do it would either not do it or they would go and see a senior member of staff and say ‘this is no good, why am I supposed to do it?’ and they’ll say ‘well just don’t bother doing it’ [Bob]

It appeared that participants were aware of managerial attitudes that condoned non-compliance. As a result of engaging with three participants who held managerial roles I realised that this might skew the data. I also became aware that this may reflect a political slant that I was trying to avoid and, in terms of one narrative, this was a perceived tendency.

There are flavours of a managerial stance in much of what is said, and I worry that this will have negative connotations for how I want to represent the transcript. It seems to be about making ‘them’ comply, whereas I am more interested in why they don’t in the first place [Field Notes]

Incidental non-compliance

Other reasons for non-compliance were widely cited by the participants. Once again they were able to recount this in terms of ‘the other’ i.e. and did not relate this to themselves. These comprised the second sub theme i.e. non compliance unrelated to a deliberate act of resistance but which, nevertheless, represented a failure to comply with the institutional policy. Pressure of work was the most frequently cited reason.

I mean I know it sounds like it’s an excuse but one reason is that generally people have a lot to do and finding a couple of hours here and there for doing peer observation, which doesn’t sound a lot, um you know, it’s a not a high priority, all things considered….And a lot of
people are very focused on that and that’s all they want to do – we want to get this right and we don’t have, the urgency all things considered, to take part in peer observation and other auxiliary stuff which, yes may be helpful to me but then that’s one or two hours I could be putting in to getting my next class ready [Jack]

Yeah I mean I think that any of these kinds of things, anything which involves people doing something on top of their already quite often heavy workload, there is, and particularly if it’s couched in sort of bureaucratic terms like, you have to do at least two of these in order to be able to … then that is likely to rub a lot of people up the wrong way [Mike]

Linked to this was the added pressure of being observed which was felt to necessitate more time being spent on preparing a session than might otherwise be the case. This only increased the reasons why colleagues failed to participate. It was not something that was easy to accommodate into normal work, it was seen to require additional preparation.

And I think sometimes you know, you shouldn’t have to do extra work when somebody’s going to peer observe you, but I think a lot of people feel they have to [Anna]

For some the process of peer observation per se was felt to be a time consuming process.

I think one of the issues which never really bothers me but it bothers a lot of people is the amount of time it takes for the whole process. Because there’s the niggly problems at the beginning of making a time that works and emails going backwards and forwards to make it work. And then there’s the classes cancelled for this reason and that reason; the students don’t turn up, and so on. So there’s all the practical side of getting it to happen. Then it happens and there’s the observation. Then there’s the discussion. Then there’s a typed, usually a typed document between the parties [Bob]
Some participants recognised that staff resisted peer observation as a developmental process because they perceived no personal benefit. Participants related a concept of experience in the role negating the need for peer observation.

*I mean there is a member of staff who I shall not name who, when told that peer observation was going to be undertaken by everybody, refused point blank to take part on the grounds that there was nothing anyone could tell him about how to teach ...* [Phil]

*And it’s always the ones who’ve been here the longest who don’t seem to feel that they ought to have somebody in the classroom. They’ve been here long enough – that’s it* [Sue]

*I think a lot of people are just disinterested in it and, of course, you do have a number of people, and over the years I’ve come into contact with this, you know, the attitude which is, and I mean I’m not making this up because somebody said it to me – ‘uh I got my teaching certificate in 1974 and um I don’t see why I should have to – there’s nothing you can teach me about teaching’* [Gavin]

Of significance in many narratives was the notion that peer observation was not seen as a priority in the context of a fast-paced working environment, with multiple competing priorities that is seen to characterise contemporary HE settings.

*I think the logistics of it is partly one thing, you know, that people with different teaching timetables um and I think pressure of work, [ISL] all these things um you know it’s put on the backburner, it’s not something that’s top of the list* [Bev]

‘Box tickers’

Whilst many participants narrated their experiences of non-compliers it was possible to identify an additional cohort. These were individuals who complied
with the process in a superficial way – these were labelled the ‘box tickers’. The following narratives help in identifying these as individuals through the experience of the participants, and the possible reasons why they operated in this way. The concept of the box ticker seemed to be a fairly common one across disciplines, essentially involving colleagues who were seen to comply with the process by completing all the relevant documentation but who did little more than this, and for whom peer observation represented no more than a bureaucratic distraction.

*And do they have time for the feedback, or is it literally that a colleague is in the room with them when they are doing it and then they never get time to talk about it afterwards? Fill the form in that it’s happened and pass it to the ________ [ISL] [Phil]*

*And if you know somebody who’s a box ticker, and you want to be a box ticker, you might want to work with them and then it’s a quick job [Bob]*

It would appear, therefore, that some individuals were complying with a process of documentation rather than engaging with peer observation in a meaningful way. Whilst this meant that they are seen to comply with the process, it could be considered that they are, in fact, non-compliers, as Phil’s comment suggests. Necessarily this would have important implications for the nature of peer observation as a process of auditing teaching quality.

**Informal peer observation**

Many participants conveyed a preference for a more informal approach to peer observation. Their narratives revealed that they thought that (a) this was more effective and (b) it was already undertaken indirectly through team teaching. Many participants reported using a system of peer observation which did not comply with the formally outlined process.

*... sometimes we have done it in a more informal way um where we haven’t necessarily said ‘oh here’s the peer observation forms’ – but*
it's been kind of maybe someone's learning a new subject and they've sat in on classes and learned through that process. So it's not always formalised, it can be more like just a general element of peer support that goes on more widely [Jack]

Um, we don't really keep a proper record of it, but I would suggest that probably half – 50% take part in peer observation, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's always the formalised process with all the paperwork...[Jack]

I can't say that I've totally followed the [ISL] guidelines on peer observation and I realise that there are certain requirements or when we're supposed to do it etc. Um but generally speaking, probably I don't follow any of those, however, I have started doing a bit more team teaching and I've found that quite interesting to see what other colleagues do. And what their approach is. But, so perhaps it's happening on a more informal than formal basis [Jenny]

First of all any observation tends to be informal rather than formal in my experience in this institution. Um it became more formalised when we had a QAA inspection that was forthcoming. And um it happens all the time within the field that I work because we do a lot of team teaching [Anna]

...and then we gradually established more of an informal approach to peer observation through team teaching. And that's really how we do it [Bev]

It was not immediately obvious why a less formal system of peer observation was being used; the narratives hinted at several possible reasons, one of which rests on the production of documentation as part of the formal process. The narratives suggested that lecturers were more comfortable with something less bureaucratic. The regularity with which participants reported an informal use of peer observation was interesting. Some participants
narrated particular incidents when an informal ‘peer observation’ had been useful.

...sometimes we have done it in a more informal way um where we haven’t necessarily said ‘oh here’s the peer observation forms’ – but it’s been kind of maybe someone’s learning a new subject and they’ve sat in on classes and learned through that process. So it’s not always formalised, it can be more like just a general element of peer support that goes on more widely [Jack]

...someone wanted me to come in to observe a session and partly to learn about the group, as the group dynamics, there was some issues in terms of, in a crude sense, crowd control. It was a deliberate plan for me to watch the session but also to understand how a course team might better handle this particular group of students [Jack]

...and I’ve certainly gone into colleagues on that basis, where they’ve said ‘I’m struggling with it’ or if I’ve been struggling with a group of students I’d ask somebody to come in and just sort of give me some tips or whatever [Anna]

Whilst some participants suggested that an informal process of observation was preferable for positive reasons, others were quite clear that the formal process was rejected because it was inherently flawed.

Recording on a piece of paper that um you know the particular strengths of a session was this but an area for development was that just doesn’t feel right. I think it’s better for that to be talked through with your colleague and you then come to some sort of understanding by questioning your colleague or whatever, mutual understanding and not what you’re going to do about it. But recording it seems almost not the right format, because it’s a very personal piece of learning – recording it formally doesn’t fit I think [Bev]
Team teaching

Several participants related the use of team teaching to the process of peer observation. It was unclear why the use of team teaching was frequently seen to negate the need for formal approaches to peer observation but it was a regularly cited phenomenon. I felt that participants may have used their involvement in team teaching to defend their own failure to undertake formal peer observation. This was related first hand i.e. participants themselves justified their own actions (as well as their colleagues) in this way. It might also be construed that team teaching was seen to provide a justification for the sharing of classroom territory and the power dynamic might also be perceived differently, despite those teaching together not necessarily being true peers. It might be felt that the common purpose of teaching is sufficient to render power dynamics less significant or meaningful. Nevertheless team teaching was a popularly cited explanation for why peer observation was not undertaken. Bev claimed that team teaching was itself perceived as an informal approach to peer observation.

I have started doing a bit more team teaching and I’ve found that quite interesting to see what other colleagues do. And what their approach is. But, so perhaps it’s happening on a more informal than formal basis...... You know, I’ve taught alongside people and been in the same room at the same time and we’ve exchanged ideas but I’m not sure in terms of you know, rigorous observation and feedback that we’ve necessarily done that. [Jenny]

And um it happens all the time within the field that I work because we do a lot of team teaching. And team teaching isn’t sharing the module it’s actually having two of us in the class [Anna]

... then we gradually established more of an informal approach to peer observation through team teaching [Bev]

The central issue here appeared to be that team teaching is not specifically focused on staff development. It is less likely that any feedback is given by the
parties concerned. As such it is difficult to see why team teaching was popularly regarded as a replacement for peer observation and the development that is intended to arise from it.

Peer and power

The following section indicates the extent to which participants recognised the position of power within peer observation, either in being observed or in observing another. The primary sub theme is the concept of the term ‘peer’. Two further sub themes are identified, ‘buddy observation’ and the ‘personal relationship' with colleagues.

The concept of ‘peer’

Several participants identified a power discrepancy between the parties when undertaking peer observation and the impact that this had on the way in which it was experienced, particularly by the observee. Central to this section is the use (or misuse) of the term ‘peer’. The extremely sensitive nature of the process was frequently recognised and, in particular, the information acquired about a colleague as a result of observing them. Bob identified this in relation to the observee, recognising the possible personal consequences following an observation. These consequences clearly relate to the earlier issue of vulnerability.

*Because if I am faced with evidence and views and so on that I can’t necessarily handle then, and I am talking figuratively, if the observed is faced with comments and views that the can’t maybe handle, then obviously that can go a step further and become much more personal and people can feel, well ‘wow this has really thrown me as to what I am doing and whether I am doing the right thing’ as it were [Bob]*

*But of course it’s a private encounter isn’t it between two individuals because you are not supposed to have to share the information [Anna]*
...if you’re going to have somebody in your classroom, having a relationship with them beforehand is critical. Because if you don’t have the relationship then ... [Anna]

Several participants recognised the relationship between the concept of ‘peer’ (recognising this as something that was fundamentally problematic) and the place of power inherent within the process. The use of the word peer was also discussed within several of the narratives, with participants recognising that in many instances peer observation did not involve true ‘peers’. This was obviously particularly true for those participants who held managerial positions.

Even if they do see it as being a literally peer thing... another issue actually which is a point, is – and this is another area which has kind of cropped up in my research but I haven’t had chance to unpick, is the kind of power the relationship between members of staff issue [Phil]

I think the problem is um, at first the notion of ‘peer’ seems clean, but actually my experience over these last years is that there is um, the whole thing is murky and the theoretical notion of peer to peer is actually almost never evidenced and almost any situation of two people, one watching the other, you’ll either have massive experience difference, in terms of years of experience teaching or you might have a lecturer and a principal lecturer or whatever, in terms of therefore a difference in grade or whatever .... and in most pairings, if not all, there’s some feeling on each side, that means that the theoretical notion of absolutely equal peer relationship just doesn’t happen [Bob]

...I mean I think what we’re talking about is peer to peer but your boss coming in isn’t peer, but people put it in the same category and it isn’t in the same category [Anna]
Buddy observation

Many participants recognised that individual lecturers arranged peer observation with certain colleagues rather than others. This notion of ‘buddy’ observation, as I termed it, appeared to be a common experience and constituted a sub theme.

*It tends to be um within subject groups, so a few people who generally work together or are developing modules together um tend to, well, with some minor management, set up their own partnerships or to do it… so it’s very much left to the academics themselves, to finalise the details of who is going to do what to whom [Jack]*

*They will tend to go with people who they think they’ve got an affinity with, they might have worked with in the past, who they feel will have an understanding of their discipline area. And who they feel probably won’t be overtly critical [Gillian]*

There appeared to be two factors associated with the buddy observation concept. Firstly, as Gillian recognised, by choosing his or her observer the observee was able to exert some control within the process i.e. being able to manage an aspect of perceived risk – to avoid a partnership with someone who they felt may be critical or who they were unable to trust. This notion of trust, or indeed managing the situation in order that trust could be guaranteed, was reinforced several times within the narratives. Bob responded directly to a question about choosing who might observe an individual.

*I think that’s absolutely true because one thing I found was that there was a strong feeling that people wanted to be able to control that [Bob]*

*Because it’s – you know, if you ask someone ‘ok ____ [indicates name] you can come into my session and we’ll do some peer observation’, you trust in this colleague not to completely shatter your – ‘so that’s absolutely useless _______ [indicates name]. you should give up!’[Bev]*
Here the participant recognised the extent to which trust was necessary in order to preserve the lecturer’s self esteem. Equally it was felt that the buddy may be chosen because they were seen to exhibit a similar attitude to the observee. In this case Bob recounted a situation in which someone with a ‘box ticker’ attitude would deliberately choose to work with another ‘box ticker’; simply for expediency.

*And if you know somebody who’s a box ticker, and you want to be a box ticker, you might want to work with them and then it’s a quick job* [Bob].

**The personal relationship**

It was recognised that peer observation is a social process and, as a result, it had implications for relationships amongst colleagues. As one participant suggested it had a direct consequence for the future relationship of the observer with the observed. This was partly linked to reputation (and potential threats to this) but it was also recognised that it might impact on the relationship *per se*. This was an element of the findings which was unpredicted at the outset and which receives limited attention in the literature.

*Well, to me it threatens those three things, which is my relationship with the person who I am working with directly, whether this is the observer or the observed, it threatens the relationship between the two; it threatens the reputation of the observed and potentially of the observer, more widely in the group (and the department or whatever) and certainly with that other person* [Bob]

As the interviews progressed what emerged was the concept of the personal relationship; there was a sense of collegiality transcending a number of the comments. Whilst some participants appeared to vilify non-compliers others were more sensitive.

*Alerted by the previous interview I am conscious of the notion of vulnerability. This particular participant would not sense this perhaps*
for herself, she is quite senior, but she might recognise it as a feature for others. As we relax I begin to intuit that this person cares about her colleagues and is genuinely concerned for their welfare [Field Notes]

Positive benefits

The majority of the participants readily acknowledged several benefits to peer observation. These were difficult to categorize in their entirety but some were easier to elucidate. The broadest category contained references to the development of skills or techniques of a pedagogical nature. For some this included a more refined use of information and communication technology such as Blackboard™ (a virtual learning environment).

Many participants recognised that the benefits to the process were more tangible to the observer rather than the observee; it was felt that this role led to the greatest degree of professional development. There was an almost universal acknowledgement that more was gained from observing another, and there was no direct link to inexperience in that even those with many years experience in HE felt that they gained from observing another.

And I have never felt that there was nothing I could learn from watching my peers or indeed being told by them what they think. Because we all have areas in which we could improve and, you know, very often people teach in a way that you haven’t thought of [Phil].

I think, I mean there are things that I would like to observe other people doing, for example, which I haven’t had the opportunity to do, which peer observation would give me an example to do, and it’s to do with the new technology in delivery [Phil]

I’ve always felt that I’ve gained a great deal observing anybody. I definitely feel as though I gain more from observing that from being observed [Bob]
Every time I watch somebody teach I do learn a great deal, simple things, mannerisms. The way in which you concentrate on parts of the room and not other parts. I saw an excellent example of that in another institution, again in which the tutor, it was as if he had a spring attached to his shoulder and his neck and he just looked in one part of the room. And afterwards that was actually something that I raised with people watching me, asking them, because I became aware that I was doing a similar thing but more with the central vision rather than these extreme people (indicating either side of the room) at the edges. So it was something that I would raise with an observer, ‘did I like equally look at people in the room or did you sense that I was looking more at some than others’ and sometimes I was conscious that I thought that I was standing that middle percent [Bob]

Personally I found that watching someone else has been, in many ways, more helpful than being watched by a colleague, stealing ideas, watching basically how people do things in different ways. I find that very interesting watching how other people teach. Don’t necessarily get the same out of it if you’re being observed, because I think colleagues tend to be more restrained in terms of giving constructive criticism about what you’ve done. But I think people watching someone else, I think in many cases that’s more rewarding; the observer gets more out of the experience [Jack].

I think you learn as much doing peer observation as you doing being observed. And I actually think doing peer observation is probably the bigger learning curve [Anna]

…the most powerful learning was really from the observer’s point of view. And they always said so much has changed…… But the person who has been observed doesn’t seem to get some much learning out of it [Bev]

I found the narrative from Bob particularly insightful. Clearly this lecturer was openly engaging with the results of observing another. It was particularly
poignant because I knew that this was one of the most experienced peer observers amongst all the participants and yet he was perhaps the most insistent that he learned from watching others. Here he was able to narrate his approach to using the information gained in a positive way in terms of his own teaching. I felt that this was representative of all that I valued about peer observation myself and yet it had humbled me at the time.

\[ I \text{ cannot help feeling very humbled when he starts to discuss how he learns so much from observing others. Surely this guy has seen it all? I am forced to confront my own feelings of over adequacy in the classroom.} \text{.. [Field Notes]} \]

A further positive aspect of peer observation as experienced by the participants involved the development of trust amongst colleagues. Although this was reported less than the benefits of observing others it emerged in several narratives. It was an unexpected finding but related to the earlier issues of threat and vulnerabilities.

\[ I \text{ mean what I've found with having a close colleague come and sit on my classes was it was kind of like a bonding experience. It was quite interesting to see how we did things and it kind of enhanced our professional relationship I think [Mike]} \]

Well I think if it goes on informally or formally I think it's good that sort of like knowledge sharing between colleagues and it also helps to um develop trust I think [Bev].

Further prompting revealed the following.

\[ \text{Between staff. Because it's – you know, if you ask someone 'ok [indicates name] you can come into my session and we’ll do some peer observation', you trust in this colleague not to completely shatter your – 'so that's absolutely useless [indicates name], you should give up!' So I think it develops trust and it develops a sort of collegiality I think, as a team approach [Bev].} \]
In this narrative the names of the people referred to have been removed for the purposes of anonymity. The relationship between the observer and the observed is highlighted in this section of narrative. Bev revealed what was for her an intimate part of the process; a self-revelation aspect of peer observation. This provided some hint about the vulnerabilities perceived by those being observed.

In a similar way to the notion of threat and issues of self esteem, several participants identified the experience of personal validation through peer observation. By this I mean that the observee wished to or actually did perceive a sense of being recognised as 'satisfactory' in terms of his or her performance. This is specifically revealed in the following section.

Because so many people that I have spoken with in the last few years about this kind of subject, they've often said words to the effect of 'I just wanted to know that I was ok as a teacher' ..... just the idea of people saying it was ok was liberating to them [Bob].

This offered a direct contrast to a notion of threat; perhaps peer observation is still perceived as threatening but the outcome is, as Bob said, a liberating one and this outweighed the potential threat. One participant identified peer observation as a method of validating his approach in the classroom...

I also had a colleague who was the head of department come in and sit in on one of my classes on um ____________ [indicates precise subject], which was again very positive feedback. And that was good because I think I was just only a couple of years of me joining the department so it was quite useful for me to have something like validated by a senior member of staff had been sitting in one of my classes and found to be very useful [Mike]

The perceived benefits from using interdisciplinary approaches are mentioned in this meta theme. This was not an entirely surprising factor for several reasons. Firstly the institution had recently undergone significant re-organisation, with faculties being restructured, so staff were mindful of altered
professional links with other colleagues. Secondly, and as one participant discussed, post graduate teaching programmes frequently include staff from multi disciplinary backgrounds, so this may feel a familiar approach for some staff when considering peer observation.

_Because although we all teach in different subjects, I mean, lots of the challenges we face we come to the widening participation student base are the same and we could all learn from each other. But there’s no effective way of doing that_ [Phil]

_I’ve watched people perhaps you know in somewhat different subject areas – but then you can still learn about the processes, the ideas, the techniques they’re using even though it’s not in your subject area_ [Jack]

_... it would be quite interesting to see people from other faculties, that would be another way in which it could be done_ [Jenny]

_... every year we should do at least a couple of peer reviews of um preferably people outside of our own discipline um, which I remember thinking – really good idea. I’d really like to do that_ [Mike]

_I think that one of the big disadvantages is that it doesn’t often go outside your own discipline. I think that’s a huge barrier because you know, your teaching a discipline there’s often a way, there’s group thinking about how things are going, how things should be delivered, what’s good practice. And sometimes seeing someone from another discipline gives you an alternative viewpoint_ [Anna]

It was clear that several participants recognised a value to undertaking peer observation outside of their own discipline. They felt that there was something to be gained from this in pedagogical terms and there was a sense that this ought to be something that an institutional process should encourage.
The final sub theme relates to the use of informal approaches to peer observation. Reinforcing the earlier suggestion that peer observation was rejected because it is an overly formal process one participant recommended that future approaches should be more informal. The formality itself was seen as detrimental to the process.

Recording on a piece of paper that um you know the particular strengths of a session was this but an area for development was that just doesn’t feel right. I think it’s better for that to be talked through with your colleague and you then come to some sort of understanding by questioning your colleague or whatever, mutual understanding and not what you’re going to do about it. But recording it seems almost not the right format, because it’s a very personal piece of learning – recording it formally doesn’t fit I think [Bev]

Additional factors

The study was less concerned with the intricacies of the peer observation process *per se* however several participants identified aspects which might be regarded as procedural, specifically in relation to improving future experiences. Although I had not intended to investigate procedural mechanisms in recognising an emancipatory basis to the research I was mindful to include these, concerned to (a) acknowledge the narratives and sensitivities of the participants in what had become (I felt) an emotive subject and (b) to elevate their experience into action. This latter was felt to be particularly important given that so many participants recognised that peer observation had huge benefits for the institution although these were unrealised because of a lack of dissemination of good practice (see below). I felt compelled to acknowledge this in the way that I represented their experiences.

One obvious additional theme which emerged was the notion of training for peer observation. At present the institution offered no training for those undertaking peer observation and this was generally felt to be an important flaw.
...I think the observed party does need the skill and part of the training process, I think, needs to help the observed to be a catalyst, to be more forward in the event ...... But I do think that one thing that isn't always there is that people need help to cope with this from a higher level point of view, a more emotional point of view if you like [Bob]

... giving feedback is a skill in its own right, and nobody's trained in peer feedback, nobody's trained in how to give constructive feedback [Anna]

Well I don't think it would go amiss to have some training opportunity on the strengths of peer observation and how to be a peer observer and how to be observed. I mean I've never seen that [Gillian]

A further sub theme to this section was the perceived failure of the institution to disseminate and learn from best practice derived from previous peer observation. Many participants lamented this failure. I sensed feelings of frustration and despair that good ideas and examples of innovative teaching were wasted through a failure to share across the institution.

And we have some way of, you know, moving that, disseminating that further than just the course team. What about the other course teams throughout the rest of the faculty? What about the rest of the institution come to that? Because although we all teach in different subjects, I mean, lots of the challenges we face we come to the widening participation student base are the same and we could all learn from each other [Phil]

I think that one of the big disadvantages is that it doesn't often go outside your own discipline. I think that's a huge barrier because you know, your teaching a discipline there's often a way, there's group thinking about how things are going, how things should be delivered, what's good practice [Anna]
Linking to the earlier finding which related to a more informal approach to peer observation (which was generally favoured), participants recommended that the process should reflect a less formal approach.

"Oh, I think the only, the only um thing about peer observation I would say, you know we've got a form – I don't like using that. Again if you impose that on people that's more difficult because again it's more 'sign at the bottom' and things like that. I think it's much more of an informal basis" [Sue]

Summary

The data from the narratives covered some anticipated findings but also revealed some areas that were unexpected. Five meta themes emerged from the analysis of the ten narratives; some were clearly focused on the individual, in particular those which addressed threats, fears and vulnerabilities. But linked to these were the perceived impact of institutional policy and procedure, chiefly those pertaining to performance. The narratives revealed the mechanisms used by individuals to manage or evade these perceived threats and the very existence of such approaches only confirmed the level of fear attached to them. These mechanisms (deliberate non-compliance, box tickers etc) posed a significant problem for institutions in terms of the purpose of peer observation and the veracity of information acquired in terms of documentary evidence. The following chapter addresses the issues identified from the narratives. Whilst one is compelled to separate these issues for the purposes of analysis it is acknowledged that such separation is somewhat artificial as many of the issues are clearly linked.
Chapter five
Discussion of the findings and a consideration of the implications for practice

The findings of this study provide a number of insights into various aspects of the participants’ experience of peer observation within HE. Participants were able to narrate issues from their own practice using both their own professional life experiences but they also readily drew upon what they perceived to be the experience of those around them. The data suggest that there are implications for peer observation both at the personal and institutional level. This chapter concentrates on three main findings of the research and exposes areas of new knowledge which go beyond earlier work. Despite reducing the eventual number of narrative interviews to ten it is acknowledged that certain areas of analysis which might have been pursued have been reduced in order to adequately address the principal findings of the work. These areas are likely to provide further avenues of research and I will be attending to these at a later time.

Threats, fears and vulnerabilities; the personal and professional impact of peer observation

The first meta theme labelled threats, fears and vulnerabilities is of primary significance in terms of the initial research questions. My suspicions that there existed a perceived sense of threat or fear which prevented or at least limited the extent to which peer observation was undertaken, were confirmed by the narratives surrounding this area. Nevertheless the level of reported fear was remarkable and indicated the degree to which this distinguished this study from earlier work. Eight of the ten narratives recorded a perceived threat or fear associated with the process. The ethical dimension to this aspect of the data became more prominent the more I realised both the significance and the extent to which such threats and fears were reported as commonplace. As a result of this it was necessary to advance the data in measured steps, without placing additional stressors upon the participants as they revealed their narratives.
Intrinsic threats

Several of the participants discussed the concept of peer observation representing a personal threat although, in general, they related this to the perception of their colleagues. The regularity with which this was reported appears to indicate that, for this institution at least, there exists a sense of personal threat from the peer observation process in the minds of many academic staff. The findings clearly indicate that lecturers perceived peer observation as inherently threatening on a personal level. As the data indicate there are several possible explanations for this apparently vivid sense of threat.

Firstly the regularity with which participants noted the intrinsic threats posed to the individual was felt to be significant. These were quite separate from threats posed from external sources i.e. the institution (which are considered later), and these pointed toward a sense of intrinsic fear for some individuals. Participants did not feel a personal threat themselves but reported this in terms of ‘the other’. Of course one may question whether the participants would have confessed to feeling this, given the circumstances and, if they had felt threatened, such subterfuge only serves to further underline the vulnerability associated with the process. Intuitively I felt that those who had agreed to participate did so because they felt comfortable with the questions the research was likely to raise and were, on the whole, unperturbed by the process of peer observation.

Two aspects of particular relevance to this issue emerged from the data at this stage. Firstly one returns to the changing landscape of academic communities referred to in chapter two. The recognition that academics are increasingly working in isolation and that disciplines have become effectively redundant through greater specialisation (Rowland 2002) may offer a possible explanation for some of the data. One might speculate that academics are generally feeling more vulnerable because they are no longer operating in the academic communities that they once did. This sense of increased isolation would only be augmented in the absence of an identified community.
Secondly it is possible to consider the data with reference to the nature of personal and academic identity. In establishing what makes peer observation inherently threatening to the individual I return to the work of Goffman (1959) and his definitive text regarding the presentation of self discussed in Chapter 2, specifically his use of the metaphor of the theatre. Goffman argues that the performance occurs in the ‘front region’ and using this analogy one recognises this as the classroom performance. The work that goes on behind the stage (‘back region’) is seen to contribute to the identity of the performer during the delivery of the performance and includes the adoption of the character on display. It is possible to postulate, therefore, that lecturers deliberately acquire a classroom persona which is different from their ‘back region’ identity. It may be required in order to shield their sensitivities and what is adopted may be a character which they believe affords greater credence to their performance within the classroom. This area of the work is tentative and requires further exploration with a wider field of participants. But this possible explanation offers some understanding of why lecturers might feel anxious about revealing their front region identities to their peers. This leads to an analysis of what lecturers felt about this so-called front region i.e. the classroom.

Classroom as sanctuary and territory

It was clear from the narratives that some individuals felt threatened by the prospect of another person entering the classroom to watch them. Kelchtermans’ (1996) earlier work concerning the emotional domain of teaching in classrooms described concepts of vulnerability. In contrast to Kelchtermans’ work, based in the compulsory sector, this study suggests that emotions go beyond a sense of vulnerability and stray into the province of fear. It is more than a sense of perceived susceptibility, which may relate to much more than personal sensitivities or vulnerabilities (as Kelchtermans suggests); something more fundamental may be in operation. The regularity with which this was reported would suggest that it may be less concerned with personality although further work would confirm this suspicion. Nevertheless the classroom was recognised as a place of sanctuary and was seen to represent the legitimate territory of the lecturer performing in it.
Analysis of the data revealed three distinct areas relating to the concept of classroom as sanctuary or territory and much of the data appeared to go beyond the findings of earlier studies. The notion of the classroom as territory was mentioned by several participants. Occasionally the references to this concept were obscure but the language used to describe how lecturers felt about their relationship to the classroom revealed some significant findings which extended certain understanding in this area. There was a clear indication that for some participants the classroom is perceived as a stage and is something which is constructed, in a metaphorical sense, for a specific purpose and which was related (a) to their performance as teachers and (b) for a particular audience (i.e. students). The extent to which this construction takes accounts of the way lecturers manage the vulnerabilities attached to this performing role in the classroom is an interesting proposition and is one worth pursuing through further research. Equally how far lecturers perceived a sense of threat when this space is invaded by other individuals (other than those regarded as the legitimate audience i.e. students), was difficult to gauge in precise terms. However this study clearly indicated that the presence of another person for the purposes of peer observation was seen by some as an invasive threat and represented something to be feared by the individual lecturer and which may engender anxiety on several levels. The regularity with which participants used the language of ‘fear’ was particularly significant and indicated a pattern of response which far exceeds the notion of vulnerability associated with earlier work (Klechtermans 1996). This study identifies the need to look more closely at such patterns of response.

Establishing the precise basis for such fear and anxiety, together with estimating the level of impact on the individual, represents an area of considerable further enquiry. Nevertheless this study indicated several potential influences operating in the individual lecturer in respect of the perceived level of fear, not least at the neurological level. Acknowledging recent advancements in our understanding of the fear response in the mammalian brain, in particular the identification of the role of neural anatomical regions such as the amygdala (Maren 2005), it is necessary to consider how this could be applied to the fear of peer observation as
identified in this study. It is possible to suggest that such fears are inherently linked to memories of fear which become ingrained in responses to stressful situations (Maren 2005), such as being observed by a peer. In this way it would appear that the situation *per se* provokes the response, rather than simply the presence of the peer. Thus it could be suggested that such situations might always have a similar effect each time they were repeated. If this were the case then considerations by institutions aimed at increasing compliance with peer observation would prove fruitless unless they were to able acknowledge the potential impact of both fear memories and context in relation to the fear response. Necessarily this has significant implications for policy development to which I will refer in the final chapter.

The second area to consider within this notion of the classroom as sanctuary is the idea that the work of a lecturer in the classroom is perceived as a private encounter. This was mentioned by one participant and suggests that what lecturers are doing in classrooms is something that they believe is to be regarded as a private activity with students and should not be intruded upon lest it interferes with that relationship. This is somewhat conjecture but the references to this might lead one to suggest that the classroom, when in use, is felt to belong to someone (i.e. the lecturer) and interlopers are unwelcome and may, in some way, be deleterious to the process in operation. Consequently it could be suggested that the classroom, in being seen to 'belong' to the lecturer in residence, becomes his or her territory. This would appear to be supported by references to peer observation being used to 'manage' difficult student groups. In this particular situation it was reported that the deliberate presence of another lecturer was intended to offer a perspective on group dynamics. Necessarily this would have been pre-arranged and, significantly in terms of territory, at the behest of the lecturer concerned. Such examples gave a strong indication that the concept of territory might be significant in explaining why peer observation might be resisted. As a result one might consider if peer observation should be by 'by invitation only'. The sense of a private encounter might lead to suggestions that the performance is intended for a specific audience i.e. the students and one might feel, therefore, that only they should see it.
Finally the sense of the classroom affording the lecturer a sense of autonomy seems to be of significance. Whilst peer observation *per se* might not threaten this autonomy (particularly if undertaken by a peer) one questions whether lecturers are comfortable with revealing how this sense of autonomy is achieved and maintained. The data is incomplete in terms of such explanations however the sense of classroom as sanctuary resonates with many anecdotal experiences in which I have heard colleagues suggest that this was the only place they felt that they could not be ‘disturbed’. One questioned whether lecturers were, as a result of an increasing level of surveillance within the institution, now regarding the classroom as the ultimate domain of the autonomous academic. Anything that threatened that sense of autonomy, such as peer observation, would therefore offer due cause for resistance.

Several aspects of the narratives suggest that the classroom might represent a place of personal space and this appeared significant. However the data does not verify if lecturers recognised that this was the only area in which they felt at liberty from managerial interference. This represents a separate area of future research.

**Extrinsic threats**

The narratives identified several perceived threats from peer observation which were external to the individual. Quite clearly the narratives, particularly those relating to ‘the other’ recognised the fear engendered as a result of poor performance. Professional consequences were perceived, such as the potential for losing employment, although this was acknowledged as being extremely unlikely. More plausible were the perceived threats emerging out of managerialist approaches to the outcomes of peer observation; these included the threat of performance management and consequences arising from it. Narratives taken from four participants all indicated a perceived threat from such approaches. Essentially participants relayed the anxieties of their colleagues who perceived that the outcomes of peer observation would contribute in some way to a verdict on their performance in the classroom and that this would have an impact on their salary and or prospects within the institution. The
use of the words 'spying' and 'big brother' indicated the level of suspicion that appeared to be widely held. The extent to which this was perceived as a threat was astonishing and distinguishes this work from earlier studies. While some participants, particularly those in management positions, dispelled such anxieties as being unrelated to the process of peer observation, as they saw it, they recognised the extent of these fears amongst their colleagues. It appeared that managers had been unable to allay their fears, despite the peer observation process in the institution being in place for several years.

It appeared, therefore, that the perspective of peer observation being tantamount to management espionage was difficult to counter. One questioned why this should be so, because no examples were cited of any actual reprisal arising from peer observation which might have supported such fears. Nevertheless the narratives indicated a widespread mistrust of the process of peer observation; specifically lecturers did not trust management to utilise the information gained from it in ways that would not penalise or disadvantage them. For some this mistrust was sufficient to justify a complete rejection of the process altogether.

The overt fear of management retribution as a result of poor performance is highlighted within this study. This supports a number of issues identified within the contemporary literature concerning the emergence and subsequent dominance of a managerialist hegemony within the sector. The demise of academic communities, identified by Becher and Trowler (2001) has heralded constraints on intellectual enquiry and innovation. This study identifies the extent to which this has become a reality for lecturers and offers further evidence of the predominance of bureaucracy over academic pursuit.

**Non compliance**

The fact that no 'non-compliers' came forward to be interviewed for this study (however desirable this might have been) was clearly lamentable but is perhaps of little surprise. One might postulate that non-compliers working
within an era of increasing levels of audit (and expectations arising from this) are unlikely to flagrantly advertise their position for fear of exposure, despite assurances of anonymity within the research process. Had such individuals been recruited it might have been possible to pursue their perspectives and clarify the rationale for their non-compliance; narratives may have emerged that reflected a deliberate and focused sense of resistance to a managerialist discourse within the institution. Equally it might have been possible to explore issues of perceived threat or vulnerability as a result of the process of peer observation itself. Were they resisting out of a sense of fear of the consequences for them at the hands of the institution or were there deeper issues that threatened their sense of self as a person and as a professional? Nevertheless it was clear from the participants’ experience that levels of non-compliance within the institution were high. This was unrelated to discipline area; most participants reported similar situations. Necessarily the whole area of non-compliance represents a significant area for further enquiry.

Their narratives reflected a situation in which the presence of non-compliers (or ‘known offenders’, as they have been labelled within the study) appeared to be a well established phenomenon. The widespread recognition amongst the participants that the non-compliance of such individuals appeared to be condoned within the institution was surprising. Participants provided several explanations why they thought that this situation had been allowed to persist, despite what they felt were obvious consequences; these included a strong union orientation within the institution which, although it had not directly advocated non-compliance, appeared to have had some role in the resistance to peer observation. This was regarded as an historical issue for the institution which had persisted without challenge and there was a sense of resigned acceptance that this had been allowed to persist. The frustration that this caused for some of the participants was evident. The notion of the ‘known offender’ I felt to be of particular significance to the study. In an institution which appeared to have a strong managerialist ethos there were, paradoxically, managers who felt that the institution had had little impact on known offenders either in the
past or currently and that this had had a consequent effect on their own impact as managers.

Box Tickers

The emergence of the so-called ‘box ticker’ within the study proved an interesting feature and appears to support the findings of earlier research. Shortland (2004) noted the presence of those who apparently complied but who showed little commitment to the process of peer observation. This study would appear to go further than Shortland’s work in demonstrating the presence of box tickers who were not only uncommitted to the process but who deliberately falsified the documentation. The presence of these individuals was reported across several disciplines with many participants able to recognise their existence in the institution. It was not possible to verify why such individuals acted in this way but issues of being seen to comply with the management culture would appear to offer some explanation. Linked with reports of non-compliance arising as a result of heavy workloads, one might postulate that box tickers also acted in this way for the sake of expediency. Nevertheless it is equally feasible that a ‘box ticker’ may be offering a silent protest. For the purposes of gauging non-compliance these individuals might be regarded as covert resisters. They were not engaging with the peer observation process at all and one assumes were uninterested in pursuing peer observation for its own sake, recognising no direct personal gain. It is, of course, possible that they were undertaking informal means of peer observation (see below) in addition to the tick box approach.

The actions of these individuals, however, would undermine any internal quality mechanism which rests solely on the strength of documentary evidence. Documentation produced as a result of false accounting of peer observation clearly fails to represent any meaningful contribution to teaching quality. How far institutions might wish to go to ascertain the veracity of such documentation produced as a result of peer observation is difficult to predict. The findings of this study appear to suggest that the actions of box tickers might militate against improving standards where either workloads or motivation to undertake peer observation are
questioned by the individuals concerned. For the reasons discussed such individuals may represent a particularly malevolent force, not least because their actions would be difficult for an institution to verify as spurious. They were seen to be complying with the process but with little or nothing gained, either institutionally or personally, other than the production of falsified documentation. Moreover this documentation could 'legitimately' contribute to internal or external audit upon which might rest a judgement of teaching quality or evidence of continuing staff development. One is compelled to question, therefore, if the findings of this study might be replicated elsewhere and, if were the case, how far other institutions might have claimed a level of compliance with the process, only to find the evidence to be faulty.

Informal peer observation

The references to informal approaches within the narratives were many. Although I had anticipated some the extent of this activity was surprising. However, the emergence of this aspect of the study seemed to be happening in parallel with a growing awareness of the rejection of the formal approach for the reasons already outlined. It is not clear whether the informal approaches reportedly adopted within the institution were undertaken as a direct result of the rejection of more formal ones or were undertaken for different reasons altogether.

The narratives indicated a number of explanations for using informal approaches. Perhaps the most obvious reason is that by using an entirely informal process there would be no documentation generated. Therefore the activity would be invisible to the institution and inaccessible in terms of either managerial interference or audit. Although this offers a plausible explanation it was not one directly offered by any of the participants; there was no suggestion that the informal approach was adopted specifically to limit the availability of audit data. Several participants acknowledged that they had been involved in informal peer observation, suggesting that this was undertaken *almost* as a matter of course - a regular feature of their work and otherwise unremarkable, but that they had not completed any paperwork *because* it had been informal. Their chief explanation for
rejecting a formal approach, where one was forthcoming, indicated that informality was preferred because it benefited the process; by being less formal it created an atmosphere more conducive to development (i.e. staff development). The suggestion that greater informality assisted in creating a less stressful exercise is supported by earlier work (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004).

Several narratives point to the use of a more informal approach to peer observation for specific reasons, such as dealing with a ‘difficult’ student group or for the purposes of learning a new subject area. While these narratives emphasised the emergence of an informal process as a preferred approach, what also appeared separately in the data was the explicit rejection of a recognised formal process. One participant suggested that the formality of the process *per se* rendered it inherently unfit for purpose. Quite simply the demands of a process designed for professional development were felt to become negated through formality. What was preferable was an opportunity to discuss and share understandings about what had gone well or what had not, and as a result of a shared understanding, for the observee to use this for the purposes of ongoing development. The formal approach to peer observation was, therefore, not regarded as the only means through which staff could engage with each other for the purposes of development. For some participants, the formal approach (which included the production of documentation) was consciously abandoned in favour of greater informality because it was seen to acknowledge the purpose of the process.

What was also of interest from the data is the notion of using informal peer observation as a means of collegiate support. Clearly those lecturers who, for instance, used peer observation to find ways of managing difficult student groups, had sought assistance from their colleagues. This may lead to suggestions that the benefits of gaining greater pedagogical insights for instance, as a result of informal peer support, may be considered useful by some individuals. Equally this finding suggests that the support offered in such circumstances is sufficient in itself, without the need for documentation or recourse to any other aspect of a formal process. This
perhaps underlined further the notion of teaching as a potentially threatening exercise and the need for ongoing collegial support in order to influence the quality of the educational experience. This could be contrasted with notions of audit which are designed to identify the achievement of a particular standard, to gain and ensure uniformity across the institution which is deemed to be ‘adequate’. Verification that a lecturer is meeting this standard is perhaps all that might be achieved through a process with such aims, rather than gaining a sense of personal growth through peer support and guidance.

Team teaching and its relationship to peer observation

The data indicated that team teaching was occurring across disciplines in the institution. In one discipline area this was a particularly prominent and regular feature of the pedagogical approach taken by lecturers because it was perceived as relevant to the purpose of their work (business management). However, its use as an alternative to peer observation was not anticipated at the start of the study. Many of the participants suggested that peer observation was not occurring because team teaching was in use on a regular basis; thus it was unnecessary. Some participants suggested that the use of team teaching actually justified their failure to undertake peer observation. This represents an area of new knowledge in relation to peer observation and warrants further study on a wider scale.

Team teaching was being used either because it was appropriate to the particular discipline (such as within art workshops and art studios) but it was also being used as a deliberate pedagogical method. This presented an interesting paradox in the study because by using team teaching it appears that these lecturers were less concerned with the presence of others in the classroom; the issue of territory for them seemed less problematic. Nevertheless the differences between team teaching and peer observation require some consideration because the two are distinctly different. In pursuing these differences it may be possible to consider how
team teaching could enhance peer observation but not replace it. Such considerations would have implications for future policy.

Firstly one would assume that the decision to team teach requires some element of negotiation between colleagues and one also assumes that a lecturer uncomfortable with this approach would find ways to circumvent inclusion in this form of facilitation. As a consequence there is an assumption that team teaching is likely to occur only for those lecturers who do not feel threatened by the presence of another lecturer (albeit a peer) in the classroom. It follows, therefore, that one is unlikely to encounter someone resisting team teaching but accepting of peer observation.

Secondly, and perhaps importantly for this study, is the notion that team teaching contains no required element of peer to peer feedback. Some of the participants indicated, however, that they would be likely to provide feedback to colleagues following team teaching but there is no necessity to do so. Equally, and perhaps most significantly in terms of peer observation and audit, there would be no formal record of such feedback having taken place. Any intended or unintended staff development arising from team teaching and the feedback emerging as a result, would be invisible to the institution and would, therefore, be imperceptible in terms of audit. It is also important to stress that this feedback would, therefore, have no implications for those elements of managerial control which participants had recognised as threatening (i.e. performance management). Essentially the whole exercise, in terms of its potential for staff development, could be covert. That is not to eschew the potential that such feedback might have; indeed the informality associated with a less bureaucratic approach might engender a less anxious situation which, in turn, might lead to a calmer and more reflective understanding of the outcomes. This is considered to be the central issue with this aspect of the data and links with the earlier concept of the fear response being pre-programmed in the mammalian brain. This study appears to indicate that lecturers are more aware of this than is realised and have already recognised the extent to which bureaucratic processes only intensify such responses in the individual.
In examining possible reasons why team teaching might have been offered as an alternative to peer observation the links between power, threat, fear and vulnerability are all evident. Team teaching is only likely to be undertaken by those who feel able to undertake a performance in front of other lecturers, specifically their peers. Those who do participate are likely to have been involved in the negotiation of form and content. In being party to that negotiation individuals are also likely to have been in such a position with their peers as to feel able to negotiate; thus overt power dynamics in such situations are less evident and one might suggest that a more collegial or peer-like situation exists. This would be in contrast to a peer observation session in which a power dynamic may be at play (depending on seniority and so forth), as result of which the observee may be experiencing heightened anxiety (misplaced or not) and in which he or she has probably had little control or negotiation over the format of the process. Literature relating to peer observation per se has offered limited attention to team teaching to date; this aspect of the study offers a significant avenue for further study and has obvious potential in terms of policy development, particularly in relation to professional development. This will be considered in the following chapter.

Peer and power

Several aspects of this meta theme are of significance to the study. The effect that peer observation may have on relationships amongst staff was recognised as important by participants. However what was not anticipated at the outset was the strength of feeling exhibited by many of the participants in relation to this. They were quite frank in their responses and in many instances offered some vehement arguments for greater awareness of this issue on the part of the institution. Obviously the fact that staff recognised the sensitivity associated with peer observation is to be lauded. For several of the participants there existed an acute awareness of the sense of the ‘personal’ within the process and the narratives suggest that they recognised the need for protection of this sensitive process. References to this within the narratives were many. The participants’ own recognition of this appeared to be contrasted with what they perceived was
a less personal approach taken by the institution. References to a policy for peer observation being imposed with limited negotiation with the staff were made and the narratives revealed the consequences in terms of both the feelings this had engendered and in the concomitant resistance that it had caused. The narratives indicated the impact this had for some of the participants; there was a sense of distress and anger in the words used and I felt it to be palpable in three interviews.

One struggles to see how far peer observation policies within institutions reflect this important facet for staff. It may be that the vulnerabilities perceived by staff (and for some these would appear to be extreme vulnerabilities, even fear) need to be matched by a more robust approach to peer observation and not simply in terms of recognising the need for confidentiality. The current policy in use within the institution studied already included the safeguard of confidentiality (although it was not prominent); however it had clearly not had an impact in convincing staff, some of whom remained cautious of what they feared was tantamount to managerial espionage. The possible consequences of the process in use (perceived or real) were felt to be greater than any possible gains (if these were perceived at all). Noting in particular the many references to the nature of the ‘personal’ within the process of peer observation it is clear that there are implications for how any process be perceived as (a) personally safe (in terms of respecting the individual during the event) and (b) secure (in terms of the management of the outcomes).

One area of the data which offered a clear indication of how far individuals recognised the need to manage the power dynamic inherent within the process was in the use of the buddy observer. Once again this also resonated with the notion of an inherent threat posed by the potential misuse of power within the process and so it links with the theme of threats, fears and vulnerabilities. However, I chose to position this factor within the meta theme of ‘Peer and Power’ because it demonstrated a recognition of the need for the acknowledgement and respect of power within peer observation. It is recognised, however, that there are multiple associations possible with many of the sub themes of the study.
Buddy observers were chosen by those who were being observed for specific reasons. Although no participants themselves admitted to working in this way the notion of a buddy observer was a common experience amongst their colleagues. Participants offered several explanations of why buddies were adopted as observers and essentially these revolved around the need for observees to manage the process. There was a sense that, in deliberately choosing one person rather than another to observe teaching, the situation could be manipulated. Choosing someone who would prove uncritical was seen to be one way to achieve this.

The concept of ‘peer’ has been explored in preceding chapters and the findings of this study would appear to suggest that definitions of ‘peer’ (specifically working definitions) are important in determining reasons why peer observation has to be managed by the individual concerned. The data suggested that individual lecturers have their own means of calculating who is or is not regarded as a peer (thus the emergence of a buddy). For some this might involve compatibility in terms of attitudes toward bureaucracy (such as the box tickers) or simply the recognition of someone who poses no threat to them as a lecturer. Central to this notion of peer, therefore, is the perceived position of power within the observer/observee relationship. This finding would appear to be supported by an awareness of peer observation as an inherently personal process and reflects earlier work (Washer 2006).

Perceived benefits of peer observation

Participants identified a number of benefits to peer observation. Some of these had been predicted at the outset quite simply because they resonated with my own experiences and of those with whom I had previously discussed peer observation. Perhaps the most interesting and widely shared observation from the participants was the recognition that peer observation benefited those who observed more than those who were being observed. I had long believed that to be the case and knew this to be true for myself. What was of profound interest was that this feature did not appear to diminish the more experienced one became as a teacher. One of
the most experienced participants verified this to be the case and I found this facet of his narrative very humbling. In his practice he continued to recognise the benefit of watching someone else teach, even someone far less experienced than himself, and he narrated this part of his experience with obvious excitement and enthusiasm. I contrasted this with the reports of those individuals who rejected peer observation believing that there was nothing they could gain from the process. In particular the participants noted the significance of observing someone else using technology in the classroom. This was particularly true for those who were very experienced as teachers and for whom the emergence of technology within HE (such as virtual learning environments) represents a significant development since they began teaching.

The second feature appearing within this meta theme was the concept peer observation leading to the development of trust amongst colleagues. This was identified as a positive outcome of peer observation. This would appear to link with the earlier feature of peer observation being recognised as an inherently private encounter and therefore liable to lead to perceptions of vulnerability. The recognition that peer observation led to greater levels of trust amongst those who participated lends credence to the concept of it being accepted as something very personal. Alongside the notion of classroom as territory one might postulate that, in order to feel sufficiently secure for that space to be entered by another, the individual would have to trust them. Equally, and significant in terms of the earlier discussion regarding personal threat, one would need to feel that the other person would adequately respect one’s sense of vulnerability from the process of being observed. Finally the use of a buddy to undertake peer observation appeared to acknowledge that lecturers felt sufficiently threatened as to feel compelled to choose someone who they felt they could trust. Much of this issue resonates with the earlier discussion of threats, fears and vulnerabilities and only serves to reinforce the sense of personal investment located within the process.

The concept of trust amongst academics may be considered alongside the concept of power, discussed earlier. It was noted that power (in relationship
to 'the peer') represented an important dynamic in the peer observation process. This study provides evidence to suggest that lecturers recognised the potential for the misappropriation of the power inherent in this process, specifically in relation to its effect on the individual. The data appears to suggest that lecturers were taking affirmative action to limit this potential abuse. While some were not complying with the process at all, others explicitly advocated less threatening approaches; a significant feature of this was the removal of any documentary evidence attached to process. Whether this was a deliberate action designed to undermine institutional bureaucracy or a serious attempt to delimit managerialist influences on what may have been perceived as academic endeavour is not possible to conclude from the data. This represents a further area for enquiry on a larger scale.

Summary

Some of the findings of this study appear to support earlier work on the subject. In many areas, however, the data support conclusions which go significantly beyond earlier work. Certain findings were unanticipated and, given the small scale nature of this work, demand further scrutiny through a larger, multi-sited study. Issues relating to threats, fears and vulnerabilities, the principal meta theme, were anticipated at the outset but the level of fear associated with peer observation amongst some lecturers proved far greater than expected and exceeds that reported elsewhere. Equally the vehemence with which some staff apparently resisted the institutional approach to peer observation was not predicted and may represent contemporary issues in the sector.

The rejection of formal approaches in favour of more informal methods appears to be a finding which is new to this study. Several reasons have been postulated for why this might be the case; these may revolve around an awareness amongst staff of the need for greater degrees of sensitivity when dealing with observation and feedback and the resulting suggestion that formal, documented processes fail in this respect. Whilst the adoption of informal methods means that the institution is unable to register this type
of activity, the findings of this study suggest that staff recognised the need for and benefit of peer observation despite their rejection of a formal policy. It appeared from the narratives that staff were undertaking peer observation as an informal activity and were managing this activity themselves. This finding would appear to hint at an acknowledgement of peer observation as a means of continuing professional development within HE rather than an outright denunciation of its role in improving teaching and facilitation strategies. Similarly the recognition that observing someone else teaching has positive benefits, even for experienced lecturers, appears to support the continuing use of peer observation in some form. It was also acknowledged that there were other positive effects from using peer observation, such as a greater sense of collegiality (which supports earlier work, Peel 2005); however this study points to a deeper issue than merely collegiality, it implies that peer observation both requires and generates trust amongst colleagues. Changes to policy would need to reflect this as a fundamental principle in order to achieve greater levels of compliance.

The following chapter considers the central findings in relation to the direction of future policy in higher education and makes a number of specific recommendations.
Chapter six
How should future policy reflect these new insights into peer observation?

This study appears to verify much of what has already received attention in the literature relating to peer observation however additional findings have also been reported which add to the sum of knowledge. At a time of burgeoning bureaucracy and an increasingly dominant managerialist discourse it is timely to review the impact these changes have had on the practice of education in HE. What has emerged from this study is a verification that difficulties with peer observation continue to exist and, in reality, these appear to be placed in even starker relief since earlier studies. This chapter considers the central findings of the study in relation to the five research questions; areas of new understanding are highlighted in this discussion. Areas for policy re-evaluation are then considered and recommendations offered to address some of the main issues.

One is compelled to recognise the limitations of a small scale study such as this. No attempts have been made to generalise the findings; what they offer however is a reasonably detailed insight into the perceptions of ten lecturers in one institution through their narratives. In a similar way to case study analysis, the findings represent a snapshot of a moment in time in which the participants and the researcher engaged with the subject matter.

How is peer observation perceived by those who participate in it?

The findings of this study suggest that peer observation is regarded with mistrust and suspicion, findings which support earlier work (Gosling and D’Andrea 2001, Shortland 2004, Washer 2006). Data indicate fear and suspicion about the effects of pervading managerialism and, in the case of peer observation, mistrust about how the outcomes might be used. While some earlier work identified a level of suspicion about the use of peer
observation (Shortland 2004) the high degree of threat, fear and vulnerability identified in this study appears unique. Necessarily this may be institution specific, which points to the need for a wider study in the future.

The perceptions of participants suggested that fear of peer observation has both intrinsic and extrinsic connotations for the individual. The notion of personal anxiety associated with peer observation is highlighted in earlier work (Douglas and Douglas 2006) however the level of threat perceived in this study would appear to suggest something significantly greater than anxiety. Recent advances in our understanding of the fear response being something intrinsic to the neurophysiological mechanisms of the mammalian brain offer possible explanations worthy of further investigation.

Linked to this issue are the perceptions that peer observation is a private encounter between individuals which requires trust and sensitivity, particularly on the part of observers. Many narratives identified the intensely personal nature of peer observation; once again this supports earlier work in the area (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004). Mechanisms employed to reduce vulnerability (for instance using buddy observers) underlines the level of threat perceived from peer observation. McMahon et al (2007 p 504) identified that, in terms of peer observation, ‘information is, literally, power’. This study indicates that lecturers, mistrusting of the process of peer observation will go to some lengths to afford themselves a locus of control in that process. They feel compelled to try to manage the process of peer observation as a direct consequence of feeling threatened by their lack of control over the information that might thereafter be out of their hands. Hence we see lecturers actively managing the environment and the situation in which peer observation is undertaken; such as using ‘buddy observers’, choosing the particular session for observation etc. In this way they manipulate what is available for observation and by whom, simply in order to feel confident that what might be scrutinised further up the hierarchy, will have no repercussions.

Extraneous threats were also perceived; these included management exploitation, retaliation and feelings of possible job insecurity as a result of poor performance. It may be that the increasing commercialisation in UK
higher education is giving rise to greater uncertainties amongst academics who fear the consequence of an emergent performance driven ethos in the learning community. Of significance in the findings of this study is a fear of peer observation being used as a means of institutional or managerial espionage. Several of the narratives indicated that other lecturers (not the participants themselves) regarded this as sufficient justification for non-compliance. For these lecturers the classroom was perceived as an area of refuge in which their autonomy was allowed to prevail without interference.

Non-compliance was seen to take several forms. The presence of box tickers in the study was an interesting finding. Shortland’s study (2004) identified similar individuals who failed to comply with the process but who submitted documentation anyway. The rejection of formal approaches (with accompanying documentation) was advocated in order to reflect the personal nature of the process. Documentary evidence was seen as a threat in itself because individuals feared what might be done with it once out of the hands of observers.

What does peer observation represent in relation to standards in HE?

As a result of this small scale study it is possible to raise a critical lens to the veracity of audit data pertaining to peer observation in HE. In response to external scrutiny universities continue to offer evidence of internal processes, such as peer observation, to demonstrate valid approaches to quality assurance. However this study indicates that the existence of a peer observation policy is an inadequate basis for claims of quality assurance. Nor indeed does it represent a process of professional development which is embraced by those for whom it is intended. Necessarily this perhaps paints the bleakest of pictures as this study also indicated that some staff were using peer observation to good effect. However the institution cannot claim that the process is flawless, particularly where the actions of non-compliers (particularly those who falsify documentation) may have deleterious effects which pervade significant areas, such as staff morale, and thus undermine efforts aimed at collegiality. This study supports earlier assertions that
processes intended to exert greater managerial control have had the reverse effect, as staff have deliberately offered resistance (Shortland 2004). While individuals might undermine the process this particular research question sought to identify the impact peer observation has on the quality of teaching. However what appears to have emerged is the resistance of some staff to openly demonstrate their teaching to others for a variety of reasons; what is not possible to determine is whether this has had a demonstrable effect on the standard of teaching that occurs in contemporary HE. While some staff readily perceive benefits to peer observation this factor alone has not been influential in encouraging widespread endorsement and uptake. So what effect does peer observation have on quality in HE?

While quality assurance processes determine the attainment of standards the narratives pointed to the effect peer observation could have in disseminating best practice. It is acknowledged that the process of audit is distasteful to educators (Tam 2001) and there exists a significant level of scepticism on the part of academics regarding the impact of quality assurance mechanisms in HE (Cartwright 2007). The findings of this study appear to concur with this and suggest that some academics deliberately reject embracing aspects of the quality assurance agenda for a number of reasons. Principally this is due to fear of measurement of or judgement about the individual lecturer’s performance.

Is peer observation perceived by participants to contribute to standards of teaching?

This study indicates that for some lecturers peer observation can and ought to contribute to improved standards of teaching. While some participants identified positive outcomes of peer observation there was also a suggestion that for many lecturers peer observation represented another bureaucratic obstacle necessitating extra work and documentation. This perspective would appear to support earlier studies (Martin and Double 1998, Douglas and Douglas 2006, Washer 2006). Pressure of time was one reason why lecturers did not participate in peer observation.
The data indicated some positive effects of peer observation; it was seen as beneficial in managing potentially difficult student groups. Similarly its use in advocating and demonstrating technology in the classroom was highlighted by several participants. The adaptation of teaching strategies to accommodate these developments is of interest to academe. This is an interesting observation arising from the findings and may indicate an area of pedagogical development of which institutions need to take account. Necessarily as the sector moves increasingly into a mass consumer culture, in which changing facilitation strategies have reduced the focus on the individual (Cotterill and Waterhouse 1998), the implications for professional development emerge and become worthy of further study.

Equally this study indicates that peer observation was seen to offer a process of validation and mutual support and some participants recognised that it increased trust amongst colleagues. As individual lecturers work increasingly in isolation the opportunity to witness the work of another, particularly in terms of pedagogical approaches, was seen as beneficial.

In terms of its potential for influencing teaching, however, peer observation appeared to hinder the process for those lecturers who felt threatened by the potential outcomes. As a result those activities which might pose specific challenges for the lecturer, such as the difficult subject area or repeating a session which has not gone well before, but which may offer the most in terms of professional development, might be excluded from view for fear of the consequences. The perceived necessity for operating in this way represents the extent to which (a) some lecturers dislike peer observation and (b) current approaches to peer observation, which focus only on what a lecturer does well, fail to adequately address developmental requirements. This offers, perhaps, the most striking paradox; if peer observation is intended to aid professional development it cannot do so if lecturers only expose their strengths rather than their weaknesses.
To what extent do participants perceive a benefit to peer observation?

Participants identified several benefits to peer observation (in addition to its effect on teaching), many of which concur with previous studies. The idea that the individual acting as the observer actually gains the most from the process supports earlier work (Martin and Double 1998, Hendry and Dean 2002, Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004, Douglas and Douglas 2006). Whereas Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004) noted that inexperienced lecturers gained from being observed by experienced colleagues, this study identified that even experienced lecturers felt that they could gain from observing others. This is an interesting feature and warrants some consideration particularly when deciding who should be trained as peer observers (see below). Equally it offers verification about how peer observation processes could be organised to account for maximum benefit (either personally or to the institution). What is clear from the above is that the process could actually benefit both parties and, as a result, the focus of the observation, in terms of outcomes, could be altered to encourage a critical response from both parties. This would also have the effect of altering the power dynamic.

One benefit of observing others involves the use of information and communication technologies. Their use in the sector is recognised as a feature of contemporary learning with which academics need to engage far more (Fearn 2008). The increasing use of technology in higher education is recognised by the participants, some of whom would have entered academia before the emergence of virtual learning environments etc. For them witnessing what others are doing with this technology, particularly if they were more competent, was seen as a positive benefit of undertaking peer observation. While this is clearly an issue involving the acquisition of new skills, it exemplifies the ways in which new approaches to pedagogy (whether involving technology or not) might become more widely appreciated in academe.
Several participants mentioned the potential benefit of cross-disciplinary observation. From their narratives there was a sense that this would improve the process in general and increase the opportunities for examining other people’s practice. Necessarily the emphasis here would be the development of the observer rather than the observee (supporting the notion that that observer gains the most). This suggestion concurs with the literature (Douglas and Douglas 2006, Washer 2006). However if the process were focused on technique rather than content, the use of someone outside one’s own discipline may move the emphasis in this direction. Nevertheless this factor would have to be balanced with issues of trust and threat, as has already been discussed. The fact that many participants recognised the use of buddy observers lends credence to the notion that the choice of partner is important (Washer 2006). The introduction of an observer from outside the observee’s own department may provoke significant anxieties similar to those attached to Subject Review (QAA) and would offer little benefit.

To what extent do participants perceive disadvantages to peer observation?

What have been identified above are the explanations about why individuals might object to peer observation; the process itself appeared to offer disadvantages to some lecturers as a result of their scepticism of the process and fears that the outcomes would be exploited for other means. The failure to undertake peer observation centred on perception (threats, fears and vulnerabilities), limited time and disagreeing with the procedure/documentation and the system of information gathering (as the documentary outcomes became known outside of the peer observation pair).

The failure of the process to be adopted across the institution does, however, provide disadvantages which warrant some consideration. The negative perceptions associated with peer observation, which have already been identified, are central disadvantages for lecturers. While these are significant at the personal level, and have been discussed, the consequences of these for the institution are far reaching. The participants with managerial roles alluded to the difficulty of trying to gain compliance in their areas when certain
'known offenders' (as they have been labelled) were at large and remained unchallenged. Their influence was felt to be pervasive and caused frustration for the managers. As a result of the institution at a senior level failing to address this issue, managers perceived themselves to be unsupported and discouraged in their attempts to gain greater uptake of peer observation. This represents a significant disadvantage, not to the process of peer observation per se, but to the potential for peer observation to have beneficial effects.

Therefore the research questions posed at the outset of this study have been addressed through narratives. New areas of knowledge regarding peer observation have been exposed and, as has been discussed, several factors have been seen to be influential. These are at the level of the individual and the institution. It is not possible to generalise findings but, as a result of this study it is possible to propose a hypothesis relating to peer observation. There are factors operating at the level of the individual lecturer which can militate against the effective use of peer observation as a tool for professional development. Indications for further research are outlined below.

**Contextual issues**

The interviews were undertaken over a period of approximately six months in 2008 and occurred following a period of substantial restructuring in the host institution. This factor was clearly important as it had featured prominently in the working lives of the participants and some referred to this in the narratives. While this is not an unusual activity in HEI's I was aware that this may have had some bearing on the study. It is possible that peer observation had been adversely affected in that opportunities to undertake it may have been reduced as workloads became altered. Although some participants mentioned the impact of heavy workloads in general terms there were no claims that the restructuring had directly reduced peer observation activity.

**Strengths of the study**

The primary strength of this work is that it is grounded in the everyday practice of lecturers in HE for whom undertaking peer observation is a common expectation. Necessarily this is seen to be of particular relevance to a
practitioner doctorate. There is strength too in verifying earlier work and locating similarities in the present day experiences. This study has also identified several new areas of knowledge. Fear, rather than anxiety, is seen to be associated with the process of peer observation.

It was clear from the responses of participants that there was strong support for peer observation in some quarters but that the features of the process itself ameliorated against a wider endorsement in the institution. Many positive benefits to peer observation were acknowledged; some of these involved pragmatic issues of inter alia using information and communication technology more effectively, others were far more fundamental such as increasing trust and support amongst academic colleagues. There was a strong sense that peer observation could have an impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning but that the failure to utilise the outcomes of the process led to a poor uptake. The gains were perceived as insufficient to warrant the effort to participate.

In as much as the institution resembles similar HEI’s and is reflective of the patterns of professional life experienced in many other UK universities, one might offer the findings for consideration by other institutions and by the academy as a whole. There would appear to be several features of this small study worthy of more detailed research which are discussed below. Returning to Crotty’s (1998) assertion that researchers should be clear for whom the knowledge is intended, the findings would appear relevant to those communities identified in chapter one. Practitioners are perhaps the primary audience and what has emerged is of relevance to a variety of sectors, not necessarily HE, which use peer observation. Equally managers and others with an interest in the continuing professional development of educational practitioners could attend to some of the findings and suggestions of the participants. Finally there are issues for policy makers and those who design and use audit systems designed to demonstrate quality assurance in universities.
Shortcomings of the study

One is compelled to recognise that this is a small scale study using only one institution and a limited number of participants. It is not possible, given these obvious limitations, to draw any generalisations from the data. What they do offer, however, is an insight into the lives of lecturers in one HE institution in the south of England.

The use of a narrative approach appears to have enabled the pursuit of the individual stories. In some instances these have been difficult and I was aware of the delicate nature of some of the issues involved. The concept of personal identity for individual lecturers is, in certain instances, problematic. The fact that many of the participants offered ‘third party’ narratives is perhaps indicative of this. However I would readily acknowledge my inexperience with the narrative approach and, as always, one recognises those features and skills which were developed and refined in the course of undertaking the research which would have been useful at the outset.

While the use of a narrative approach as a means of data collection was the intention at the outset of the study, in reality what has emerged is a compressed version of this. I would acknowledge that the primary source of data is recognisable as a series of orthodox qualitative interviews. On reflection I recognise that greater emphasis of a narrative approach is certainly possible and, given further time, would have been desirable. Equally, although I felt that the use of field notes attempted to demonstrate my approaches to reflexivity in the work, these could have been incorporated in a more sophisticated way. What they do outline, however, are the instances during the engagement with the participants, in which the ethical dimensions came to the fore.

What has emerged in the findings highlights a number of problematic areas for the institution concerned. As a result of the contentious nature of some of these findings it is imperative that there is no possibility of identification of the institution in the text. Consequently I have chosen not to include references to the Ethics Committee approval gained through this institution. However all
ethical requirements and procedures were complied with in full and the study was carefully supervised throughout.

Further research

Alternative research strategies would necessarily have produced a different array of results. It is clear that the narrative approach employed in this way, using only a limited number of participants, has generated case study level data. This has proved adequate in establishing a number of difficulties associated with the process in one institution. There appear to be at least three specific areas for further research.

Firstly the central feature of this study has been the recognition of high levels of mistrust of the process of peer observation, engendering fear amongst lecturers. It is possible that this relates to institution specific factors operating at this university. However the limited insights that the study has afforded suggest that a further comparative study would be justified, using a multi-centred approach. Necessarily such a study would establish if the institution used in this study has produced particularly erroneous results. It would also be able to establish if the experiences and responses of those who participated in this study were similar or contrary to lecturers elsewhere. A multi-sited study would establish the veracity of these findings.

Secondly the questions which have emerged regarding the legitimacy of audit data are extremely important. Judgements regarding the quality of professional development undertaken in an institution are of significance to external agencies, the student as consumer, as well as to staff themselves. In suggesting that such data is potentially flawed, this study needs to be replicated on a much larger scale in order to verify claims of limited confidence. Moreover it is vital to know on the basis of what level of peer observation activity are universities making such claims. This study has not attempted to quantify the amount of peer observation being formally undertaken but this is also an important parameter which should be established.
Developments in HE are rapid and it is important to establish, through further enquiry, if and how these changes ought to affect policy and process, such as is represented by peer observation. It is acknowledged that the emergence of the audit culture has occurred at pace in the sector and one might question whether our own appetites as consumers of audit data has increased our tolerance of and responses to audit activities as professionals. Hence it is feasible to consider whether lecturers in HE may have become more readily accepting of processes of quality assurance because (a) they (as consumers) recognise the usefulness of the outcome of audit data (in the form of league tables and so forth) and (b) they have become accustomed to these requirements. As a result of this supposition it would be interesting to test the perceptions of professionals in a longitudinal way, to establish if parameters have altered as the audit culture has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon. This may represent an area for further study.

It is evident that there is a compelling argument to undertake a larger scale study as a matter of some urgency. The need to investigate this across other institutions is clear in order that some degree of generalisation of findings be possible. However, even on the basis of the findings of this study, it is evident that peer observation processes require re-evaluation.

**Recommendations for policy and practice**

There are three principal areas of the study which require consideration in terms of future policy in relation to peer observation. These relate to the personal nature of the process i.e. the place of the ‘person’, the nature of the power dynamic in the process and the relationship of peer observation to audit.

**The place of the person**

This study identifies an increased fear of peer observation; the level of fear is seen to go beyond the reports of anxieties in earlier studies. This indicates the need for an approach which acknowledges the sensitive issues surrounding one person’s teaching being scrutinised by another. Participants in this study recognised that the current policy failed to address this adequately. It may be
argued that the institutional policies aimed at achieving reasonable levels of staff compliance with peer observation will fail if issues concerning both fear and trust are not sufficiently accounted for and emphasised in such a way as to ensure confidence.

If neurological mechanisms operate in such a way as to predetermine a fear response then future strategies must acknowledge peer observation as inherently threatening, regardless of the individuals concerned. Removing the perceived threats would mean that individuals would not have to contrive ways of managing it, either by using buddy observers or by undermining the process itself, as box tickers appear to do. The recognition of a personal threat demonstrates the need for greater sensitivity associated with the process of peer observation; it appears that the notion of personal threat should be acknowledged in the way peer observation is both designed and undertaken. Therefore both policy and practical approaches need to reflect perceived threats; simply ensuring that the process is anonymous is insufficient. This study indicates that this alone had little impact in gaining widespread adoption of peer observation. While clearly important, anonymity is only one factor which is required in order to afford protection to the individual. This study suggests that peer observation processes need to acknowledge the sensitivities of the lecturers involved, on both sides. Threats to reputation, identity, confidence, together with the potential impact the process might have on professional relationships need to be carefully managed. Necessarily these are issues which require preparation and training and are considered below.

Current approaches seek to emphasise the confidential nature of the process but the production of documentation which leaves the hands of the observer and the observer undermine this feature. Institutions might regard the production of documentation as the preferred means of verifying the process but this study would suggest that this is open to sabotage and therefore probably renders the process meaningless. The implications for documentation of the process are, therefore, referred to later.
Re-positioning power dynamics

Secondly it might be useful to consider how power dynamics inherent in processes like peer observation, could be altered in order to increase both uptake and efficacy. Acknowledging the nature of the true ‘peer’ relationship might be an important first step and, in so doing, I return to Gosling’s (2002) theoretical models of peer observation discussed in chapter two. Gosling recognised the multifarious nature of peer observation and the differing power relations associated with three approaches. Evaluative methods utilise a managerial emphasis which leads to an evaluation or judgement and these may reflect the difficulties associated with peer observation observed in this study. Such approaches may be used as internal quality assurance mechanisms but more importantly have been used in external audit (QAA Subject Review), the latter being referred to in the narratives.

Developmental approaches necessarily emphasise issues of professional development and these are frequently experienced with post graduate teaching programmes. Many participants mentioned this approach to observation and one participant, having recently completed such a programme, was able to relate to this quite easily.

Finally Gosling identifies the true peer review approach to observation. This approach has two distinguishing features which would appear significant given the findings of this study. Firstly the process is not aimed at a judgement; it provides an opportunity for reflective and constructive feedback. Secondly Gosling (2002) asserts that the essence of this approach is a sense of mutuality; thus it recognises and values the fundamental role of peers. If this peer review approach were to be recommended on the basis of this study it might address several of the identified issues. Primarily it would negate the need for a judgement to be made; thus the anxieties generated from concern about the ramifications of a ‘poor’ outcome would be diminished. The suspicion that the outcome might be used by management in some detrimental way to the individual would be removed, particularly if the documentation associated with the process no longer incorporated any judgement regarding performance. This study revealed that lecturers
themselves already acknowledged the extreme sensitivity of the process; the rejection of formal processes in favour of the less formal, undocumented interactions with colleagues in order to pursue professional development, highlights this factor. In emphasising the mutuality associated with the peer review approach outlined by Gosling the implications of power differentials would necessarily be addressed.

This study revealed that lecturers themselves already acknowledged the extreme sensitivity of the process; the rejection of formal processes in favour of the less formal, undocumented interactions with colleagues in order to pursue professional development, highlights this factor. In emphasising the mutuality associated with the peer review approach outlined by Gosling the implications of power differentials would necessarily be addressed. Similarly it may be possible for the constructive feedback, seen as central to the peer review approach, to reflect a two-way rather than a one-way process. In so doing observers could acknowledge their own learning from the process of observation, a fact which was highlighted in many narratives in this study.

In practical terms one might suggest that, using a peer-review approach (above) as an underlining principle, lecturers might co-construct a review of an observed session, using the observer’s identification of his or her own learning as a result of watching the other lecturer. Of significance, and acknowledging the data from this study, would be the absence of any form of judgement or evaluation as a result of this observation. In terms of documentary evidence of this type of approach one might suggest that a simple record of the event occurring together with a record of the lecturers concerned (although who observed whom would be irrelevant) ought to suffice. Necessarily thought would need to be given about who observes whom, taking account of earlier discussions regarding ‘who is my peer?’

What might emerge, therefore, is a far more informal process which reflects the needs of lecturers’ vulnerabilities and which could be seen to contribute to the sharing of innovation and best practice. The failure of institutions to promote, by some means, the dissemination of best practice was identified as a significant drawback to the current approach. Limited uptake of the process
in general, together with the necessity for overt secrecy about what had been observed, meant that there was little 'product' from the process, other than the available of evidence for audit purposes (albeit that such evidence might be flawed). But in terms of what is then broadcast in the institution, the tangible output from the process was difficult to ascertain. This was seen as a negative feature because individuals perceived the process to have a limited effect; more could be gained if there was an evident wider benefit. Therefore, a process which permitted and indeed promoted the exhibition and discussion of good practice and innovation might engender greater uptake. Whilst dissemination at a local level might reflect specific disciplinary nuances, wider sharing across disciplinary boundaries might also provide significant insights, particularly with regard to the use of technology for learning, as was mentioned by several participants. Dissemination need not identify those involved but, for instance, might take the form of anonymised accounts in internal newsletters, local teaching and learning groups etc. It might be argued that a greater uptake of peer observation could be achieved by using this approach and this could ultimately lead to improved standards of teaching.

**Peer observation and audit**

Managing the data arising from peer observation requires consideration in terms of policy re-evaluation. This study identified that lecturers inherently mistrusted the process because they were frightened of management espionage. This was only possible because documentary evidence enabled management to judge performance following observation. For them the difficulties rested on (a) the failure of the process to recognise them as individuals rather than items accessible to audit and (b) the potential for repercussions. Martin and Double (1998) emphasise the need for the observee to own the feedback and there is a general consensus in the literature that the encounter between observer and observee is confidential. McMahon et al (2007 p 510) suggest the need for the observee to 'control the data flow' associated with the process and in this way perceptions of threat are regarded as manageable. The removal of documentary evidence of peer observation appears to be the most obvious recommendation in the light of the above. While this would render the process inaccessible to audit the findings
of this study indicate that what currently constitutes audit data is probably unsafe.

In considering how this might be translated into practice one might advocate that formal processes be abandoned altogether. Using alternatives such as have been described above, in which a true peer review approach is adopted, and using a less scrutinious style in favour of a more collegial and developmental one, may prove more palatable to lecturers. However this study has also identified those for whom peer observation is felt to offer little benefit and whose views mean that they are less than likely to become involved, regardless of changes to the process.

The need for training in peer observation has been highlighted in this study and this concurs with earlier research (Martin and Double 1998, Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004, Douglas and Douglas 2006, Washer 2006). There are perhaps two areas of training which require consideration. Firstly and, in the light of this study, it is pertinent to consider how those involved in peer observation could be better prepared to undertake this role. Of principal importance is the recognition that peer observation does indeed require specific preparation. It is proposed that mere experience of being peer observed is insufficient. Considering the personal nature of the process such training might need to pay particular attention to the following; the nature of the 'trusting' relationship which acknowledges the potential threat involved, the avoidance of judgmental feedback and finally how the process might be undertaken using a bi-lateral approach, as has been described above, and recorded as has been suggested.

Secondly it is necessary to consider how peer observation processes might more closely link into processes of teaching development. Of particular interest in this study were the comments relating to information and communication technology, with participants recognising the benefit of observing how others were using these in the classroom. This is perhaps only one example of how the observation of others might lead to improved approaches to pedagogy, with innovations perhaps being shared across disciplines. Peer observation is frequently referred to during annual appraisal
processes; reflecting the changes proposed above one might suggest that it might usefully focus on the developments in teaching and learning arising out of observing others, perhaps in alternative disciplines. Reference was made by participants regarding the perceived possibilities and potential value of cross-disciplinary observation. Encouraging lecturers to focus on pedagogical development through the appraisal process, as well as on subject expertise, might serve to highlight its importance, particularly in those institutions which label themselves as ‘teaching-led’.

Concluding comments

The undermining of audit processes directed at demonstrating quality, such as has been described through the action of box tickers, offers significant support to Strathern’s (2000) critique of performance as a measure of quality. In attempting to lay bare the constructs of a quality provision, in this case the quality of teaching in HE, the process used in the institution studied may be regarded as worthless. Moreover the ramifications, in terms of the profound impact it has on individuals, may involve personal and professional behaviours. Behaviours may alter as individuals reconstruct ways of working which render them less vulnerable to those managerialist influences which they perceive impact on their sense of autonomy. In this study the reactions of individuals to these influences have included deliberately resisting peer observation, using pseudo-alternative strategies (team teaching and informal processes) and sabotaging the process by falsifying documentation. Equally individuals may exhibit strategies which limit the impact that such processes may have in terms of personal threat, by constructing the observation event and/or territory in which they perform and through restricting access to buddy observers.

While recognising that it is not possible to generalise findings from a study such as this, it is clear that the issues of power and threat operate in processes of peer observation and afford meaningful difficulties for some lecturers. One might postulate that if individual lecturers are sufficiently concerned to accommodate the effects of power and perceived threats, such
as have been described in this study, peer observation might be more effective (or at least more widely accepted) if these threats were explicitly recognised in the process rather than ignored. As a result of this recognition it is suggested that in designing a process to be amenable to audit institutions have rendered the outcomes worthless. By removing peer observation from audit scrutiny its intended aims of improving the quality of teaching might be achievable.

The findings of this small study support Washer’s (2006) assertion that the use of peer observation in the HE sector is limited. Although there has been no attempt to quantify the use of peer observation in the institution studied, there were clear indications from participants that in some areas it was not happening at all. Some participants, particularly those in management positions, were extremely frank about the failure of the process to be wholeheartedly adopted in their areas. Similarly others were frustrated that the institution apparently condoned deliberate resistance, recognising the difficulties that this approach had on engaging staff with the process.

There was an awareness on the part of several participants that an increased adoption of peer observation might occur if there was greater evidence of the advantages. The sharing of innovation and examples of best practice was thought to offer an important incentive and yet it was felt that the institution had been unsuccessful in disseminating this to date. The apparent failure of the institution to embed and acknowledge the benefits of peer observation was seen as the central reason why it had had such limited uptake. Washer (2006 p 249) recognises that the successful implementation of a peer observation policy relies on a ‘strong strategic steer from a very senior level’. The failure of the institution to employ such an approach, and even to condone its rejection in some quarters, appeared to be partly responsible for the lack of support for the process.

In considering the implications of the above it is pertinent to return to the issues of professionalism and performance, which are really the crux of many of these deliberations. In the introduction I outlined the dichotomy associated with the professional educator working in contemporary higher education.
There now appears to exist a fundamental paradox between the ramifications of the Dearing Report, which implied the need for an increasingly professional approach to teaching and learning, and the continued emergence of a technicised, bureaucratic and systems-orientated scheme of quality assurance which denies and denounces the very essence of professional practice. There is evidence to suggest that this study highlights processes which directly militate against professional practice in higher education.

Necessarily the above represents an unambiguous summary of what might be achieved and one is compelled to recognise that many factors are operating which might impact on the effective use of peer observation. Similarly despite addressing issue of inter alia power dynamics, lecturers may still hold grave suspicions, such is the level of threat perceived by such processes. This may be representative of the increasing interest in quality in higher education and what Cartwright (2007 p 29) terms ‘the global move towards the exercise of greater control over the educational workforce’. This allows us the opportunity to return to Strathern’s (2000) central thesis, the so-called tyranny of making the invisible visible.

In the introduction to this work I drew on the work of Strathern (2000) which eloquently recognised the futility of auditing performance, quite simply because the process itself becomes manipulated into an exercise in auditing activity or, as Strathern (p 310) suggests, ‘how performance matches up to performance indicators’. Fundamental to her critique is her assertion that visibility (i.e. audit data) is erroneously being seen to account for knowledge (of the structure or system). She suggests that the nature of audit is an inadequate means of ensuring this knowledge and, therefore, control because it constitutes artifice. Moreover the relationship of the accountable professional to the generation of such data throws into question the nature of that accountability and, as has been discussed earlier, the nature of trust. One might suggest, therefore, that processes such as peer observation have fallen into precisely the trap described by Strathern (2000). Institutions have formulated ways in which the output of peer observation (documentation etc) have been over-emphasised as the desired outcome rather than devising more appropriate ways to strengthen trust in the lecturer in HE. Data from this
study would indicate that lecturers are engaging with professional
development, using informal approaches to peer observation and recognising
the need for using colleagues for specific situations. There was a strong sense
of collegiality in this respect. While lecturers may have realised the futility of
auditing their performance through peer observation it appears that the
institution, in uncritically addressing the political agenda of visibility, has not.

Strathern’s exposition of the weakness of the audit culture is perhaps a strong
indicator of a more general and pervasive dilemma, which might be described
as the demise of the Enlightenment. Gray (2007 p 217) asserts that what has
actually emerged as a result of the Enlightenment is not the promised
civilization but, as a direct consequence of Western marketisation, a ‘crisis of
legitimacy’. According to Gray we are bequeathed a culture of nihilism, which
is self-consuming and ruled by calculation. Furedi (2004) similarly laments the
pervasive effects of the post-modern era in undermining the role of the critical
intellectual. The increasing scepticism attached to the ‘exercise of intellectual
authority’ (Furedi 2004 p 43) has limited the influence and status of the
intellectual and has resulted in an era of overwhelming complacency. In terms
of higher education one might argue that this is exactly what has emerged
following the Dearing Report.

The pre-dominance of the managerialist hegemony, now firmly established
and reinforced by Dearing, has produced an intellectual underclass. This study
demonstrates the active resistance of this new ‘professional’ as academics
struggle to maintain a sense of personal autonomy in the face of
overwhelming opposition. The prevailing support for the audit culture
continues at the institutional level and is now sustained through an
accompanying bureaucratisation which services it. As public suspicion and
mistrust of expertise abound the servants of the audit culture emerge as the
arbiters of quality. The paradox of the professional arises: the practitioner to
whom the consumer turns for expert judgement is no longer considered a
credible judge of that expertise.
CP (interviewer)
ANNA (participant)

CP  Ok. Just making a start then. Just thinking of um, just how to start – how much experience have you had of being observed by your peers and/or observing other people?

ANNA  Ok, um. First of all any observation tends to be informal rather than formal in my experience in this institution. Um it became more formalised when we had a QAA inspection that was forthcoming. And um it happens all the time within the field that I work because we do a lot of team teaching. And team teaching isn’t sharing the module it’s actually having two of us in the class. So, for example, in an hour I’m going to be running the main dissertation research methods session with [identifies colleague] and we will both be in there. So we often give feedback to each other and we always discuss, after every session ‘that went well, that didn’t go well, I think we should do this’ and we often take over from each other or interject if something seems to be a bit flat. We tune into people’s body language if they don’t seem to be understanding then we can make the other aware of it. So there’s a lot of that that goes on and there’s a lot of interlinkage between some of the modules we run with my colleagues, so there’s a lot of people coming in and out all the time. So we’re often observed.

CP  So that’s a feature you would say of your particular discipline?

ANNA  Yes, I would say it’s just the way that we’ve designed what we do within our discipline area. It’s not common across the school or anything.

CP  Ok.

ANNA  Um and what we don’t get is much externality out of the discipline area yeah? And I think that’s a pity – I would say that’s the same everywhere. Um, you know there might be – you may have experienced pockets of good practice that I’m not aware of overly, um that’s more – I expect that would happen more when we were told to make it happen, it’s a very soft approach here, feedback – so consequently I think there’s some people who are doing and there’s some people who aren’t doing it.

CP  Ok. But you’re saying that um you know, this is kind of an activity which is fairly regular um but isn’t actually articulating perhaps with the kind of formal process.

ANNA  Yeah, it’s far more informal. Um, we do do formal sessions I mean, for example, as I run the main dissertation session we um sometimes have some guest lectures, I mean other colleagues will come in from other disciplines who we give peer feedback to if they ask us to. Which we will do in advance, in a more formalised way. Um but within the field there’s a lot of sort of people just doing it – I think really because we work in human resource management so
consequently the nature of the job anyway and the work and our experience anyway to offer continuous development and be tuned into that, um we don't see it as a frightening experience, we don't see it as a negative experience, we only see it as a positive thing really.

**CP**

Right. That's interesting. You mentioned right at the beginning the kind of QAA terror um, and you were saying that was the point uh, that was a point at which you kind of formalised what you were doing.

**ANNA**

I'd say that's when the institution – in my experience, that's when it became, I think it was before the QAA probably a year before our visit that it became talked about a lot more and something that we were supposed to do and log etc etc. um, and even now we're expected to log it actually every year. But of course it's a private encounter isn't it between two individuals because you are not supposed to have to share the information, but the irony is that we used to have to put evidence of it on the field reports that we used to do.

**CP**

By evidence you just mean that it took place?

**ANNA**

No, it took place and things that had come out of it in general terms, so we did have a little dilemma there I think. But um...

**CP**

Was that resolved?

**ANNA**

well I think again because of the area that we live in, the discipline we live in we're probably not that fussed about it because we didn't relate it to one person or another.

**CP**

Right. Fair enough.

**ANNA**

I suppose also we've had staff development here based on peer feedback you know, like where people have said their struggling with um difficult students, or they've got a group – and I've certainly gone into colleagues on that basis, where they've said 'I'm struggling with it' or if I've been struggling with a group of students I'd ask somebody to come in and just sort of give me some tips or whatever.

**CP**

That would resonate with other people have said, which is quite interesting.

**ANNA**

Yeah, it tends to be more as a help device and in our discipline it tends to be more because of the nature of the way we've put the modules and the teaching together.

**CP**

Right, right. A deliberate plan. Well, that's interesting. Um have you had any experience of being observed in a formal or an informal way – has that happened recently?
Um, I haven't been formally observed um, I've been observed in terms of Open Days where I did the main presentations or I've given sessions with parents in and um there's our Chartered Institute of Personnel Development programme, I had an external speaker in last week who observed me and then I observed them, but it was done more in terms of talking about the session in general not me personally actually, no.

Ok. So perhaps within the last say, you mentioned this um you know there is an intention that people do this annually or every semester or whatever, um is that something that has been done at all in say the last year or two or...

Yeah, not it certainly has. In terms of me being observed, yes I've probably been observed every week informally, on a more formal basis about once in the last year.

Ok. And how is that process arranged? Do you arrange that?

Yes, normally arranged by me.

And you would approach a colleague?

Yes, I'd just sort of say 'look I haven't been peer observed recently do you want to watch me do this or... ' or whatever it might be.

And then, presumably you have a session together afterwards?

Yes.

The usual interchange of ideas. Does that reflect any of your previous experiences either here or elsewhere of being formally observed?

I've not worked - this is the only institution I've worked in full time. I've worked for [identifies institution] but they do it in a different way.

They do, yes, absolutely. Ok. Um in terms of your experiences of observing other people, presumably then you've done that in an informal way quite recently?

Yeah.

Ok. And can you give me some idea about, in the formal sense, other people coming to you and saying 'would you come and watch me?' just as you've described 'would you come and observe me?'

And presumably then that is a process that's arranged in a way just described by yourself?

Yes.
Yes. Where I’ve observed people, they’ve approached me to do it. Um the difference with that is that as PL I have observed some of our PTVL’s, as sort of the practice lead, I’ve mooched about a little bit more in terms of doing some peer observation.

Ok. And do you get involved with perhaps people doing like the PG certs and stuff?

No, I haven’t.

No, you haven’t had that experience, ok. Just thinking then of whether it’s the informal or the formal, doesn’t matter, what do you think people have gained from this?

Um, well I think it’s sort of um, I think it makes you think – I think peer feedback makes you think about your style and I think it makes you think of alternative strategies, um. And I think anything that going to give you an insight into yourself, because you know your perception isn’t always accurate, so I think there’s a lot to gain from it personally.

What do you think the institution gains?

I think the institution gains nothing.

Nothing?

Nothing, because it’s not a formalised process. Um and the learning that’s gained from it isn’t captured unless the person is prepared to share it. So, for example, um at staff development sessions we’ve had, by open saying at staff development ‘well actually I observed so and so the other week’ – not naming, ‘and observed a session the other week and the style of doing this was fantastic and, you know, it’s something everybody could think about and learn from’. Um, but at the moment, it falls into a big black hole. They only gain something if people are doing it and it’s a very loose system. I’m aware of people that never do it.

Why do you think that is?

Um I think that it’s probably, if I’m going to be honest, I think it’s probably some people who are a bit jaded about teaching in general and some people who um – yeah, they see it as a private encounter between them and the classroom. And they don’t see it as a need to open it up and it’s not something they would welcome or want.

Perhaps, I mean going into your explanation about ‘well it’s a largely developmental thing’ and I hear exactly what you’re saying the kind of jaded – it’s a very nice expression really. Do you think there’s a kind of sense of deliberate failure to comply? Or it’s just an indifference to...
I think it's an indifference rather than deliberate. I don't think people are being provocative about it. I think some people of the old school may see at something quite negative and a big brother approach, but the fact that it's not captured, I don't see anything big brother about it.

Although I suppose some people refer to that at appraisals and stuff don't they?

I think people do refer to it at appraisals and I think um

Rightly or wrongly.

Well I think if you're going to refer to it at appraisal it has to be a target doesn't it, because otherwise it's not an appropriate place for it. Um if I think about the school that I'm in, a tremendous amount of it goes on. Just because of the way people pair up to do ...even double marking of assessments, all of this sort of thing you know, so there's quite a lot of it and people teach in classrooms. If you take the computer rooms for example, they've often got the door open and really anybody could wander in at any time – I don't think people are hiding so to speak. But I do think there's probably an element of that across the institution.

Um that's interesting thing to think about really. This notion that it might be sort of indifference than a deliberate or overt reluctance, if you see what I mean.

Yeah. Personally my perception is that it's more indifference.

Um, that's interesting. Do you think there are any disadvantages to peer observation?

I think that one of the big disadvantages is that it doesn't often go outside your own discipline. I think that's a huge barrier because you know, your teaching a discipline there's often a way, there's group thinking about how things are going, how things should be delivered, what's good practice. And sometimes seeing someone from another discipline gives you an alternative viewpoint. Um I think that's one of the big negatives, I mean I'm sure some people would say time was a problem, but you know, you're not doing it every week so I'm not convinced by that one personally. Um and I think the only negative is how the information is used.

In what way?

Well, I think you know, I think it's seen as negative because let's just say, let's just give an example off the top of my head. If a group of students went to my boss and said 'we're not happy with her teaching style and what she's doing' and then my boss decides to come in and observe me on the basis of peer feedback, it's got a negative connotation before it's started. So sometimes I think it's
linked, I think sometimes people see it in a disciplinary light, rather than a positive, you know I think it’s what it’s being used for.

CP

I suppose then that brings us into kind of questions, well is it really peer observation?

ANNA

Well, it is normally. I mean I think what we’re talking about is peer to peer but your boss coming in isn’t peer, but people put it in the same category and it isn’t in the same category. Because it’s a poor performance issue.

CP

Yes, so that’s a very separate...

ANNA

Which should be separate.

CP

Would you say that largely people um, whether it’s informal or formal, and I appreciate the team teaching thing is quite a separate thing, when people are arranging these sorts of things, people um buddy up with people they kind of regularly teach with or...

ANNA

Yes and I think that’s a negative as well. Well it’s a positive and a negative, I think, if you’re going to have somebody in your classroom, having a relationship with them beforehand is critical. Because if you don’t have the relationship then … giving feedback is a skill in its own right, and nobody’s trained in peer feedback, nobody’s trained in how to give constructive feedback, so consequently, without that training and knowledge you’re only going to ask people who you respect, who you think are good teachers yourself, you know, where you think you could buddy up and get something from the relationship. And I think as a result of that some people are probably missed out on the loop quite honestly. Your perception of them is not a high one, and consequently, you know, you wouldn’t waste your own time if you like, pairing up with them.

CP

I suppose there’s this element of trust.

ANNA

Yes, I think there has to be trust because – I think um everybody’s sensitive when they’re presenting, I don’t think anybody wants anybody to go ‘oh well that was a disaster wasn’t it ____?’ [Identifies name] I don’t think people want that sort of – and I think, you know, as a result of that you have to, I think you have to value that somebody’s going to give you, I think positive and negative, I don’t like it if somebody comes and observes me and says everything was fantastic because there’s got to be something like you know, the way I spoke to somebody or the way I glanced at somebody or you know, had I thought about doing something a different way otherwise it’s not actually adding any value at all. You already think you’re fantastic, so somebody coming in and saying ‘oh that went really well’ you say ‘well yes, it did’ that’s great; you know. So it tends to be more – I think it’s more helpful in peer observation if you have a pre-meet where you say um ‘I’d be really
interested in trying this, and I’m not very confident with this, I’d really be interested in that section of the lecture, to know a bit about the workshop’ – I actually think a pre-meet is helpful rather than just going in to sit in without any preparation.

CP

That’s interesting. I think two things have come up from speaks that I’ve had with other people. One has been this kind of confirmatory elements, and you were saying well you know, we all think we’re fantastic, which I hope people do think because most of them are. But there’s also this kind of nagging thing that people have and lots of people have said ‘I just wanted to know that I’m ok’.

ANNA

Right.

CP

You know, somebody coming in saying ‘yeah – ok’. And that in terms of just confirmatory sort of element, people valued. They didn’t want to think that they were out on a limb or going dreadfully wrong. You wouldn’t expect that with I guess with experienced people. But this kind of confirmatory thing. And the other thing, which was reversing the process, in watching other people – how much they learned. And the one thing that’s emerged has been people watching other people use technology. Where they’ve picked up ways of doing something or a particular approach using technology, which of course we are all adopting all the time. And they’ve watched them do that and thought ‘oh I can do that, yeah’. So those kind of confirmatory and kind of increased awareness of an approach has been a regular thing coming through these interviews.

ANNA

I think you find out, I think you learn as much doing peer observation as you doing being observed. And I actually think doing peer observation is probably the bigger learning curve.

CP

Watching somebody else.

ANNA

Watching somebody else. Because it we are classroom based it doesn’t have to be a session with students, it can be a staff development session, it can just be a presentation you go to by the directorate, it can be anything where you are observing people in the same industry as you. And you can pick something up, or a conference where you see lots of different styles at a conference of course. And, you know, there’s this just one snippet that you can take away from anything. I mean I observed, we had careers in the other week to help with something, and I observed the guy there and he did something that I had never thought of doing before, ever. And the next week I built it in and I thought ‘why had I never actually thought about doing that?’ You know, in the middle of it, ‘why had I not used the technology in that way?’ But I hadn’t and just observing him, you know, fantastic.

CP

And I suppose that kind of approach rather than content, its style or use of technology that might be where the interdisciplinary stuff might be very valuable.
ANNA: Yeah, I think incredibly helpful. Because I don’t think, I don’t actually think in peer observation it’s really got very much to do with content. Because um you know, you’d expect an expert to be delivering what they should be delivering in terms of material. It’s the way that they deliver it and the order they deliver it and engagement of the people in the room after delivering it.

CP: So it’s really about the pedagogy than the discipline?

ANNA: Yes, I think it’s all about the pedagogy.

CP: That’s really interesting. You said this process came in pre-QAA the kind of emphasis, perhaps, came through at that point.

ANNA: Yeah, I remember it coming through in this school.

CP: When was that? Was that the institutional QAA or your subject review?

ANNA: 2001? Something like that.

CP: And that was policy in the institution – or the drive.

ANNA: Yes, the drive.

CP: And do people kind of feel that that was kind of an imposed kind of...

ANNA: Well, I remember, I’ve been here ten years and I remember it coming in um in a much stronger way than it had and I do remember at that stage there was quite a lot of hostility to it. So it must have been something reasonably new I mean, you know I can remember that. I think, you know, six or seven years on, I don’t think it’s that big fear that people have anymore.

CP: You don’t?

ANNA: No. But maybe that’s because I’ve got blinkered views because of the discipline I’m in probably. You know.

CP: In terms of that moving from that point in 2001 or whenever to this point, has there been a growth? Has there been a – is it kind of status quo do you think with peer observation?

ANNA: Gone backwards. I think it’s behind closed doors, to be perfectly honest. I think it’s something, some people think ‘oh my God, I’ve not done any, better get on with it’ and just do one. I think it’s something that people do with regularity just because of the nature of the courses they do. Um but it’s, the emphasis has gone from it. I don’t think there’s the institutional drive behind it, no.

CP: That’s interesting. That seems to be a common thing that people are saying. Um in terms of – forgotten what I was going to say now!
In terms of um the institutional drive – if the institution were looking to re-institute this, where do you think their emphasis might need to be in order to secure better level of compliance, for want of a better word?

ANNA I think that’s the problem with it, though, isn’t it, because as soon it’s institutional driven, then it is a compliance issue. And that’s when people rebel. I think people don’t like – I think a lot of people are in teaching and lecturing because they like autonomy and the freedom. And consequently um anything that requires them to comply, it’s a little bit like when deadlines are set for exam papers to be in, you know people go ‘well I was doing it that week anyway’. It becomes this big sort of – I think it’s the wrong emphasis. And I’m not sure it should be – it’s an interesting one isn’t it. I don’t think it should be from the top, I think it should be a – Heads of School? I’m really not sure where, what the approach should be.

CP I haven’t got an answer!

ANNA No, I don’t think there is an answer, I think um you know, I don’t know, should people provide evidence on an appraisal form, might be more interesting, you know, in terms of personal development, having a little bit, ‘could you share something you know from peer observation this year’ because it needs to get people to think about it a little bit. But I think...

CP I suppose we’d probably find three weeks prior to appraisals...

ANNA Everybody’s too busy! Nobody can do anything!

[laughter]

CP I can see that happening – yeah!

ANNA I’m actually really not sure what the solution is and I think some people are terrified of it.

CP Do you? Why?

ANNA I think because they think – I just think an awful lot of teachers have this private encounter and this sort of, close the door – it’s them and the students and nobody needs to know it didn’t go well.

CP I suppose – yeah ...

ANNA Nobody needs to know about the control thing.

CP Yeah I suppose that’s the interesting thing isn’t it. this kind of sacrosanct nature of the classroom. Door shuts, here I am, my territory, nobody comes in.

ANNA I think some people are terrified that someone is going to say something that they don’t like. You know, or be sensitive to
somebody, to suggest, you know, making a point that something didn't go as well as it could have done, or whatever. Some people see it as criticism don't they, they don't see it as 'oh yeah actually, that's a good point'.

**CP**

And yet we expect the students to feedback? So if it was all going dreadfully wrong one would have expected that the students might probably have said something, somewhere in the feedback like 'this person can't teach' or...

**ANNA**

Or 'just reads their lecture notes and drones on for an hour every time!'

**CP**

Exactly, so one would expect that because we have that facility – which almost people have um accepted as a necessary feature, that you know that the additional kind of one step further is that somebody else comes in and pays particular attention to, as you say, the style and the approach, and somebody presumably qualified to do so.

**ANNA**

Yeah, I just, I think it's a difficult one and I think also the student feedback is an interesting one at the moment because, you know, traditionally where you have handed the form about and you are standing in the room, you tend to get a better hit rate and a more positive hit rate than if you say 'take that away and have a think about it and post it back'. And now we've got the electronic – and we know that they're not doing it. So consequently people are sort of in a warp where actually the feedback they're getting is minimal anyway. So you know, if they're not delivering in a classroom either...

**CP**

Um, what was I going to say? In going back to the compliance thing, is there a way to get this?

**ANNA**

Yes, I think, if there was a QAA thing or you have to do, I'd be very confident that when an email comes out twice a year, saying 'we've not had your peer observation thing yet' I myself go back to my diary and think 'well when did somebody in my classroom?' I don't seem to keep my records going about it, I know I do reasonable practice but it's certainly not formal because a lot of it is informal. Um, so there's, and it's not interdisciplinary, so there would be huge tick box. I think huge ...

**CP**

And I think if we were going to go down the, what we were saying before, you know, if there was a huge institutional drive, probably that would be the result.

**ANNA**

I think if we had an institutional drive we'd have everybody in the whole involved and you'd have um people saying 'it's an invasion or privacy, it's not in my contract'. you'd have a whole ream of ... it would have the wrong, it's a really difficult one. You know, I'm a great believer that anybody should be able to drop into your
classroom any time, what would it matter of somebody said 'would you mind if I just sit in for five minutes?'

**CP**

*Nothing to hide.*

**ANNA**

You know, what am I doing? And I think sometimes you know, you shouldn't have to do extra work when somebody's going to peer observe you, but I think a lot of people feel they have to.

**CP**

*And I'm sure that would be true with the kind of external scrutiny. People would recognise the level of importance attached to this means that I've really got to really underline everything and it's got to be perfect. But I'm sure that most people, if they were doing a regular peer observation would realise that one, life isn't perfect and what we see when we go into classrooms is a sense of reality and not everyone is going to be one hundred per cent perfect every single day.*

**ANNA**

Yes, and I think ...

**CP**

*Sometimes people are aware of that.*

**ANNA**

I think they're aware of it I just think they, when you say to them 'I'll come and peer observe you next Tuesday' you know, people worry about it really. Whereas if you just said on Tuesday 'do you mind if I pop in at half-ten?' they'll just go, 'yeah, that's fine'. I think there's a lot of fear attached to it about it.

**CP**

*What do you think that, the fear is of? The repercussions?*

**ANNA**

I think it's the fear of somebody not finding you perfect. I think it's the fear that somebody might think you're not very good maybe. I'm not sure. Um maybe people are being a bit lazy, about the way that they deliver things or their creativity and maybe they are using out of date slides and things that they would rather people didn't see. You know, maybe. I'm just putting ideas out, I don't really know. You know, so if you're going to say 'I'm going to go in and observe' they've got a lot of work to do. You know, if they thought the following week 'well, actually I was going to ask the students three questions and get them to think about it in groups and feedback' so it isn't really a teaching session, yeah. A whole host of things.

**CP**

*And yet we all recognise that that might be a perfectly legitimate...*

**ANNA**

Perfectly legitimate way of doing a class.

**CP**

*That's really interesting. It's interesting you are resonating a lot of what other people have said. I think this notion of fear is something that is coming through a lot.*

**ANNA**

I think there is and I think if your bosses are coming to observe you then that would resonate with them more wouldn't it? You know, so it's that notion of what is a peer, what you were saying.
CP  We come back to that to some extent. Interesting. Ok that’s really lovely, is there anything else that you want to add?

ANNA  No – I think that’s it really.

[interview ends]
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