Report
For
The University of Sheffield

Student Assessment
and
Feedback Research

Mary Stuart
Lucy Solomon
and
Karen Akroyd
1.0 Executive summary

Section 2 - Background

The University of Sheffield commissioned a study of assessment methods, and student perspectives on assessment in higher education as part of their response to the National Student Survey (NSS). This report details all stages of the study; a review of the literature on student assessment; information obtained from the Higher Education Academy subject centre websites; from four comparator institution websites, learning and teaching strategies and interviews with staff as well as findings from thirteen focus groups with students from nine subject areas at the University of Sheffield.

Section 3 – Methodology

This section discusses the methodologies used. The Higher Education Academy subject centre websites were searched for subject specific information relating to assessment. This was followed by a thorough search of online journal databases using the keywords ‘higher education’ and ‘assessment’. Following this a search of comparator institution websites was conducted to obtain relevant information about assessment practice in those institutions. A thorough review of these institutions learning and teaching strategies was then carried out and a key member of staff was interviewed to elucidate further relevant information. Focus groups were carried out with 51 students from the penultimate and final years across the University of Sheffield.

Section 4 – Context

This section explores the current issues and political context within higher education, contextualizing issues of student assessment. Changes in HE such as the increase in student numbers and the growing student diversity have had an effect on the way HEIs manage the assessment of students. The report suggests that students now require a variety of assessment methods, rather than a reliance on the traditional exam, in order to address a range of skills and knowledge. Evidence from several studies indicates that different types of student; women, ethnic minorities, mature
students have preferences for different assessment techniques. Some authors argue that assessment, rather than being an apolitical practice, is a socially constructed process, which reproduces ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984).

**Section 5 – Student Feedback**

Student feedback, as an integral part of assessment is discussed here. Despite the vital importance of feedback in helping students develop, there is much evidence to suggest that students do not utilise feedback very effectively. It is argued that HEIs should focus more on the efficacy of the feedback they give to students, by exploring how students use it, as well as examining a wider range of feedback methods, such as group feedback, and on-line feedback.

**Section 6 - Assessment**

This section discusses the use of both formative assessment, where the student is expected to learn from the process of assessment and the feedback received, and summative assessment, where the main purpose of the assessment is that the grade awarded contributes to the overall mark for the course. The issue of assessment criteria is also considered, and whether it is fully understood (and its meaning agreed upon) by tutors and students. Webster and Pepper (2000), for instance found a lack of clarity in the application of criterion, with tutors interpreting agreed criteria in different ways.

There is a discussion about a wide range of assessment methods, including peer assessment, self assessment, on-line assessment, group work, short assignments, and the use of portfolios. The efficacy of these various methods is explored, with a focus on problems arising from their use, as well as different authors’ views on how any such problems can be overcome. The importance of choosing the most appropriate method for the task or subject being studied is highlighted. A number of examples are used to illustrate how tutors have utilised various methods.
Section 7 – Validity and Reliability

Section seven examines issues of validity and reliability. Some authors argue that so-called ‘alternative methods’ of assessment, if used summatively, can raise issues of validity. Data indicates for instance, a lack of inter rater reliability in methods such as peer assessment and self assessment. There is also a discussion of the need for a holistic approach to assessment, in which the suitability of a range of methods is considered in relation to their appropriateness to the subject, and the environment. The concept of ‘constructive alignment’, concerned with matching learning, teaching and assessment.

Section 8 – Assessment across the disciplines

Assessment methods used in three different subjects, Languages and Linguistics, Law, and Geography are discussed in section eight. These subjects are used to show how assessment is approached within different disciplines. The first example in Languages and Linguistics, details the use of portfolios. This method is designed to develop transferable skills as well as improve student’s knowledge of language. The second example, Law, gives an overview of the types of assessment methods used within the discipline. It was found that most law tutors favour the traditional exam and that different approaches are rarely used. The third example, for Environmental Science, outlines a study where students’ assessment is based on simulation. Students are asked to make a two minute oral presentation putting forward the viewpoint of a number of chosen actors (including activists, academics, journalists and corporate spokespersons), leading to an open debate within the class.

Section 9 – Higher Education Academy Subject Networks

The subject centre networks web pages are reviewed. There are examples of what information is available on the different subject’s sites. Law is the first example; this site contains a list of resources in legal education as well as examples of innovative approaches to assessment in law. The Physical Science subject centre website provides extensive information about the range of assessment methods used within the subject. The Engineering website offers over a hundred articles related to
assessment methods in the area. Information and Computer Sciences provides mostly
generic information about assessment methods but also has sections of the website
providing subject specific tips for staff and students. Finally the Economics website
has a useful guidebook for those teaching in the area, information is provided on
using computer-aided assessment, literature reviews, portfolios as well as many
others.

Section 10 – Comparator Institutions

Four comparator institutions: Southampton, Leeds, Leicester and UCL, are discussed
in relation to their learning and teaching strategies and practices. This section outlines
some potential areas for further investigation wit staff in these institutions. Access to
staff in the four institutions was negotiated and interviews were conducted; issues of
‘commercial sensitivity’ were discussed and the findings are reported here.

Section 11 – Questions from the National Student Survey

This section discusses the issues raised by the information reviewed and is related to
the five questions posed in the National Student Survey.

Section 12 – Focus Groups

The findings from the thirteen focus groups conducted with fifty-one penultimate and
final year students at the University of Sheffield are presented. Results are sectioned
according to the appropriate questions in the NSS assessment and feedback questions
where students were asked to what extent they agreed with the following:

1. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
2. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
3. Feedback on my work has been prompt
4. I have received detailed comments on my work
5. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand
Section 13 – Issues for Sheffield to consider  

This section draws together the main issues emerging from all aspects of the research, and relates them to the questions in the assessment section of the National Student Survey (NSS) listed above.

Findings from the literature reveal a number of issues including the importance of clear criteria in all types of assessment method, and the importance of timely, effective, and detailed feedback, allowing students to develop their knowledge and skills.

These findings informed the focus groups and interviews with students and faculty that were undertaken in the second part of this study. As well as exploring students interpretation of the NSS assessment questions their views on the use of technology to assess or give feedback, an exploration of how they use feedback, whether they feel that current forms of assessment with the course of study are fair, as well as their experiences and views of assessment using varied assessment methods were examined.

Appendix One  

At the request of the University the results of the focus groups are presented by discipline area. Some of the focus groups were very small therefore they may not reflect the attitudes of the whole student body but they do provide a sense of the issues where students have concerns.
2.0 Background

The National Student Survey
The National Student Survey has been running in the UK since 2005 and is commissioned by the National Union of Students, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and UCAS.

The survey addresses seven key areas of interest in relation to students’ opinions of their university and course. These seven areas are: teaching; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; personal development; and overall satisfaction. A copy of the questionnaire is included in appendix 1. This research focuses on the area of assessment and feedback only.

Students are emailed by IPSOS, the company commissioned to conduct the research, asking them to complete the survey in their final year of undergraduate study. The email includes a direct hyperlink to the webpage hosting the survey. If students fail to complete the survey at this stage they are then sent a hard copy by mail and finally telephoned and asked to complete the study. The questionnaire is made up of 22 statements which students are asked to respond to indicating their level of agreement. A five point likert scale is provided ranging from ‘definitely agree’ (5) to ‘definitely disagree’ (1), with an additional ‘not applicable’ category to be used as necessary.

157,000 students participated in the survey in 2006 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This represents 56% of those eligible to complete it.

The Study
The University of Sheffield commissioned a study of assessment methods, and student perspectives on assessment in higher education as part of their response to the National Student Survey (NSS). This report details all stages of the study; a review of the literature on student assessment; an evaluation of four competitor institutions’; an examination of the HEA website materials on assessment and findings from focus groups with students currently studying in the final and penultimate year at the University of Sheffield.
Initially the literature review is presented. This is followed by an examination of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) subject centre material which draws out useful website information that could be of value to particular disciplines at the University of Sheffield. Results from a thorough review of Learning and Teaching strategies in relation to assessment and feedback and interviews with key staff in the University of Sheffield and 4 comparator institutions: University of Southampton; University College London; University of Leeds and the University of Leicester are presented. This is followed by the findings from thirteen focus groups run at the University of Sheffield and finally recommendations for the University to consider conclude this report.

The first phase of the research was a literature review, this reports on different methods of assessment used in a variety of disciplines, including discussing some of the more innovative methods being used in Higher Education (HE). The review begins by looking at the context of assessment in HE, acknowledging the changes that have occurred in the sector in recent years. This includes a discussion of the impact of government policy on the sector, in particular the significant increase in student numbers. As numbers have increased student diversity has increased, in particular women now outnumber men in HE. It has been suggested that students with certain characteristics, such as women or ethnic minorities, may have a preference for certain methods of assessment. As part of the discussion on assessment student feedback is examined, with a focus on how students utilise the feedback that they receive from tutors, and whether it is proving to be an effective tool for student development.

Within the literature review an in-depth examination of different assessment methods in a range of subject areas are presented. These methods include, among others, peer assessment, self assessment, on-line assessment, group work, and the use of portfolios. Example one is used to illustrate how different methods have been used by tutors. An evaluation of the efficacy of the methods chosen is also presented. Finally the review examines reliability and validity; concepts which are contested by some authors but which are a dominant part of the discourse on assessment. In the conclusion we draw out the findings of the literature review as they relate to the five questions in the assessment section of the National Student Survey.
The second stage of this project involved interviews with key staff at four comparator institutions across England. Sheffield’s Learning and Teaching (L & T) strategy was reviewed with key areas relating to assessment and feedback highlighted. The L & T strategies from each comparator institution were then reviewed with similarities and differences to Sheffield identified. Relevant questions where then directed at staff at the university to provide a comprehensive overview of the institutions policy relating to assessment and feedback. This allows a useful comparison between policies and initiatives at these key institutions and the University of Sheffield.

The final stage of this project tested student perceptions of assessment and feedback at the University of Sheffield via focus groups. The aims and objectives of this section of the research are to:

- Gain a view of student expectations on assessment and feedback;
- Gain a view of the range of assessment and feedback practices used across disciplines;
- Establish good practice in terms of assessment and feedback;
- Establish the meaning ascribed to NSS questions by students;
- Identify specific areas of student concern around assessment and feedback;
- Identify areas of difference between departments;
- Identify areas for improvement.

3.0 Methodology

**Literature review and comparator institution sections**

The Higher Education Academy subject centre websites were thoroughly searched in order to explore the current issues with regard to assessment in Higher Education, and in particular, to explore what is happening ‘on the ground’ in the variety of different subject areas to be used within this project. The search revealed a number of very useful articles outlining various innovative techniques utilised within a variety of HEIs. Most of the articles were UK based, with a small number of articles written by academics based in Australia, the U.S. and Norway. In addition a thorough search of online journals databases was carried out, using the key words, ‘higher’, ‘education’, and ‘assessment’. This yielded 435 articles, the most relevant of which have been
included in this review. Criteria were applied to assess relevance, applicability and fit with concerns highlighted by the NSS.

The literature search tended to yield two main types of article. Firstly, the journal articles found through the databases focused primarily on the wider issues concerning assessment in higher education, with a philosophical or theoretical emphasis. The debates contained in journal articles can often be situated within a political context, with authors professing strong views about the role of education, and forms of assessment within it. The articles contained on the Higher Education Academy Website tend to have a more pragmatic focus, with tutors from subject centres sharing knowledge and practical suggestions with colleagues within the same discipline, although much of the information is relevant to other subjects.

The authors attempted to source literature relating to assessment practice in Russell Group institutions in order to make the findings of the literature review as comparable to the University of Sheffield as possible. Only a relatively small number of papers in the literature were produced by, or discussed practice within, Russell Group HEIs; this mirrors the pattern of most learning and teaching literature, where studies of new universities practices tend to dominate. The papers within this category that are discussed in the report are:

*Crisp & Lister, Assessment methods in social work education: a review of the literature* (University of Glasgow).
*Hayler, Assessing Proctors: solving problems in grading student performance in a peer support system* (University of Leeds).
*Johnston’s summative assessment of portfolios: an examination of different approaches to agreement over outcomes* (Southampton University).

**Focus group section**
Focus groups were conducted with students in both second and third years of study at the University of Sheffield. 9 subject areas were covered in the study: Architecture; Chemical Engineering; French/Hispanic Studies; History; Law; Maths; MBB; Music and Psychology. Each focus group consisted of between three and five students, and
lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. A total of fifty-one students participated in the research.

The rationale for selection of departments was the desire to have departments that scored both higher (3) and lower (3) in the survey from 2006. In order to represent a range of apparent views, three departments were selected from middle scoring departments. Students were emailed inviting them to attend and were therefore mainly self selecting but when an insufficient number came forward additional students were identified for participation by staff within the departments. Despite the best efforts of staff at the University it was not possible to fill all places in every subject area.

All focus groups were tape recorded and comprehensive notes were written up immediately after the focus group as a back-up.

Each focus group was structured so as to take the students through each of the relevant questions on the survey and to explore what they thought the individual questions meant. Additional questions were posed in order to fully address the aims and objectives of the project (for a complete focus group schedule see Appendix 1).

The data generated in the focus groups was transcribed and analysed thematically to identify any ambiguity in meaning, general practice in terms of assessment and feedback, areas of concern, and any significant differences by subject group.

4.0 Context

The literature on student assessment is often contentious. Several of the papers put forward strong philosophical arguments for the need to explore the assessment practice in more detail than it has been, partly because of the significant changes which the sector has faced over the last twenty years. These changes, such as an increase in student numbers, the introduction of modular courses, and increasing student diversity have, in part, led to a need to focus on assessment including different approaches to teaching.
Johnston (2004) argues that there is pressure to make assessment cost-effective, fair and useful to employers. At the same time she says there is also pressure to consider assessment systems within the context of current thinking on learning theory and the close relationship between type of assessment and the nature of learning. Similarly, Leathwood (2005) points to increasing demands for outcomes based assessments, such as ‘key skills’ and ‘employability’, but also to the contradictory trend of the focus on student learning, on formative assessment, and on a greater range of assessment tools. Shepard (2000) argues that the dominant paradigm of the twentieth century, with its focus on scientific measurement has meant that although learning has become more constructivist, approaches to assessment have remained inappropriately focused on testing.

Leathwood (2005) sees the process of assessment as a practice which is ‘socially constructed – a social practice and social product’ (Filer, 2000:308). Thus, while much of the debates about assessment focus on constructing reliable and objective assessment tools, Leathwood points to the need to view the assessment process as ‘intimately interwoven with relations of power’. She argues that for academics to improve assessment, debates need to question ‘the different purposes of assessment and …the interests it serves’ (308). To date, she argues, ‘assessment has served to legitimize the unequal distribution of power in society’ (310). Johnston (2004) echoes these views, arguing that assessment is a ‘socio political practice’. She refers to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (1984), and his argument that assessment procedures in schools have been used as a way of organising and reproducing the social order. Johnston also refers to Delandshere (2001) who suggests that assessment has generally been understood in terms of technology, leading to a lack of theoretical analysis on the subject. In other words for some theorists assessment is seen as part of a ‘right of passage’ for students, with significant political overtones. The process of passing or failing over relating to the individual students’ knowledge of, and access to, the cultural capital embedded in the academy. Rather than being an apolitical practice, these theorists, influenced by Bourdieu (1984), suggest assessment practice in HE is designed as a political tool to reproduce the academy as is. They argue that this context should frame the debate on student success.
Webster and Pepper (2000), point to the various recent changes within higher education, such as widening participation, lifelong learning, an increase in student numbers, the introduction of modular courses, and increasing student diversity. They argue that these changes must be situated in a political context, stating that:

‘Internationally, there are moves that focus the internal and external quality assurance of teaching on assessment, and particularly on the standards of graduating students. This can be seen as a political move by state systems to verify the quality of graduate standards in a context of mass higher education systems, and the related moves to ensure that public and private investments in higher education are both accountable and provide ‘value for money’(72).

The huge changes that have occurred within higher education have led to a polarization of views within academia over issues of teaching, learning, academic standards assessment, and tutor autonomy. As Webster and Pepper (2000) point out, some academics take the view that they should retain a substantial amount of professional autonomy, whereas others argue for the need for public accountability, a need for explicit criteria and performance standards in assessment. Leathwood (2005) also points to this debate within higher education, with some arguing for the need to ‘foster intellectual independence’, while others recognise, and accept the trend towards prescriptive outcomes. With regard to the former group, Webster and Pepper (2000), point to ‘a lengthy tradition inside universities, perhaps especially among social scientists, of resisting the imposition of conformity…’ Linked to the above debates is an acknowledgment by some authors (Higgins et al, 2002 ) that the student can now be seen as a ‘consumer’, a matter which is having a strong impact on issues such as tutor autonomy and public accountability.

Webster and Pepper (2000) point to recent concerns in the UK about the maintenance of high academic standards, and what they see as a concern for the ‘apparent variability of the standards of current assessment practices by individuals, departments, institutions, and disciplinary committees’ (Chapman, 1994: 73). Leathwood (2005) also raises the issue of standards and concerns expressed within academia and the media, about ‘dumbing down’ in higher education, with some arguing that standards within HE are declining. She suggests that the debate is linked
to fears about the value of a degree and who should have access to an HE qualification.

4.1 Student diversity

Due to the expansion in higher education in recent years, the characteristics of students have become increasingly diverse, and a need to consider the wide range of students’ backgrounds and experiences, in terms of gender, ethnicity, country of origin, age and disability has become apparent. Johnston (2004) points to this increasing diversity and the consequent need to question whether this increasing range of diverse needs are being met. This section of the report will explore issues of diversity, in relation to, ethnicity and socio-economic status. However, although not directly addressed within this report, the issues of age and of disability (for instance, with regard to dyslexia) also needs to be acknowledged.

Leathwood (2005) argues that the content of the curriculum itself is socially constructed. Many authors including Spender (1980) and Bagihole and Goode (1998) have argued that the culture of higher education has been dominated by male-defined knowledge. More recently, Quinn (2004) has argued that much of the HE curriculum is inappropriate for minority ethnic and women students. Others point to gender differences in preferences for different types of assessment. Johnston (2004) cites the work of Flynn (1988) and Sirc (1989) who argue that men and women write differently. Reflecting these views, Black et al’s (1994) analysis of gender and portfolio assessment revealed differences between the portfolio contents for men and women enrolled on a first-year composition programme at Miami University. Men tended to write about their achievements more confidently than women. The emphasis during the course began to shift from a focus on ‘expressivism’ (personal writing) to ‘social constructionism’ (evidence on academic writing and particular academic discourse communities) thus advantaging men.

Dyke (1998) looked at the issue of ethnic minority progression in two English universities, and argued that the institutions ‘were not operating in a way that helped
equalize life chances but in ways that helped reinforce stratification on ethnic/racial grounds’ (317). She looked at assessment methods and criteria, and found that African students tended to do less well, because of the emphasis on examinations, rather than coursework. This can partly be explained by the fact that the minority ethnic students in the study were usually older, having entered through Access courses, and are thus less practiced at exam technique. She also points out that assessment practices penalized different writing styles, even when the assessment criteria were designed to focus on discipline-related knowledge, rather than the students’ use of English per se.

Leathwood (2005) discusses the huge impact that assessment can have on a student’s identity. Several authors (Reay and William, 1998, Canaan, 2001, Archer et al, 2003, Bartky, 1990, Kuhn, 1995) have explored these issues. Childhood experiences of school can have a profound effect later in life, impacting severely on a students’ self-esteem. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds can be particularly affected. Kuhn (1995) writes of the fear of students from working class backgrounds of ‘never getting it right’. Brown (2006) pro-vice chancellor at Leeds Metropolitan, in her presentation on assessment, as part of the ‘Challenging Perspectives on Assessment’ series, also raises the issue of student’s self-belief. She argues that students who come from socially deprived areas may find that assessment impacts on them in a negative way. If they have a bad experience, and ‘fail’, they may see themselves then as ‘failures’. Whereas, students from more ‘advantaged’ backgrounds, she argues, may be better able to cope with the challenges of assessment. Thus, she argues strongly for the need to consider assessment in the light of the student’s self-esteem and social background. Similarly, Yorke (2003) points to the need for tutors to have some understanding of the psychological effect of feedback, and argues that mature students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to a sense of personal failure.

As discussed above, there is evidence that students learn in different ways, and that certain assessment methods favour certain types of student. This suggests that there is a need to challenge some of the more traditional forms of assessment as the primary or dominant method. Crisp and Lister (2002) point to an increasing focus in the social work field (and in higher education more generally) on the need for students to be reflexive and ‘critical’ learners. A study by Bridges et al (2002) tested the view that
marks from coursework tend to be higher than for exams. The study focused on six subjects within four UK universities. The study’s findings ‘confirm the perception that students gain higher marks in coursework than in formal examinations’ (46). Thus, they point to the fact that as students tend to do less well in time constrained exams, this should be borne in mind when students are being offered modules or subjects. There were also subject differences. The extent of the difference between marks awarded for coursework, and for exams, depended on subject, with greater diversity in Computer Studies and Law, and fewer differences in English and History.

The authors argue that:

‘If some modules or subjects are assessed through formal examinations while others are assessed through coursework only, students who choose the latter are probably advantaged, particularly in Business Studies, Computer Studies and Law’. In conclusion, they claim that ‘Universities that choose to assess their students entirely through examination may greatly disadvantage some of their students’ (47).

Hatt (2002) also points to the need to consider a range of assessment methods. If tutors rely too heavily on essays, she argues, it can disadvantage students who have a wider range of skills to demonstrate.

5.0 Student feedback

Feedback is an important and integral part of student assessment. It helps the student to understand what is required of them, and how they can learn and develop. Taras (2002) sees feedback and its use in formative assessment as ‘Providing the consolidation of learning’. Cross (1996) argues that:

One of the basic principles of learning is that learners need feedback. They need to know what they are trying to accomplish, and then they need to know how close they are coming to the goal (504).
This section will look at the issue of feedback given to students. There will be discussion of the different types of feedback used within higher education and how this feedback, in its various forms, impacts on students. There is extensive literature on the issue of feedback, with some authors arguing that the process of feedback is bound up with issues of academic superiority. For instance, Higgins (2000) claims that students struggle to learn effectively from feedback because they are ‘simply unable to understand feedback comments and interpret them correctly’ (2). He argues that students are frequently excluded from the often tacit discourses of academia. These views are also reinforced by Lea and Stierer (2000) and their notion of ‘academic literacy’ which views academic writing as a ‘contextualised social practice’ where ground rules are not made explicit to students’.

Hornby (accessed 16/06/06) looks at assessment practices within the business school of a UK university. He argues that the business school environment is a particularly relevant arena to examine practice because staff in the business school could be considered a microcosm of the university in that the discipline covers a wide range of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ subject areas. In this sense, findings can be seen to be applicable to other disciplines. He found that oral feedback was rarely given to students. He also noted a lack of the use of electronic feedback (for instance, via the intranet). In general, there was very little personalizing of comments, with few tutors using the students name on feedback sheets. He found that tutors from some disciplines, such as accounting, tended to give group feedback. This is because in certain subjects, like finance, if there is a single solution to a piece of coursework, it makes sense to feed back to the whole class.

How students utilize feedback is discussed in several studies (Higgins et al, 2002, Ding, 1998). Higgins et al (2002) argues that as face-to-face student/tutor contact is diminishing, there is a greater reliance on written feedback to students. Students from two universities reported on their use of, and attitudes towards feedback. Both interviews and a large scale questionnaire were used. The students come from a wide range of backgrounds and ages. The authors found that 97% of students said that they read feedback comments, with 82% saying that they ‘pay close attention’ to feedback. Students felt strongly that tutors should make the effort to give them useful feedback. As one student says,
The minimum I think you should get is grade and at least three or four comments on why you get that grade, how you can improve (58).

They conclude that feedback is an extremely important part of the student experience. These findings are reflected in a study by Hyland (2000) in which students felt that feedback helped them identify strengths and weaknesses, engender a sense of achievement, and raise their marks in future work.

Yorke (2003) also argues for the need to question how feedback is perceived by students, and how it is being used in practice. He argues that if feedback is not being used effectively by students to actually help with their learning, if they, for instance, look at tutors’ comments and subsequently ignore them, then the feedback process is not helpful. He also suggests that it may be advisable for academics to have a greater understanding of psychology, in order to be more aware of the potential consequences of feedback to students (especially negative feedback). This greater awareness would help tutors to support students in their use of feedback and its implications for their development.

6.0 Assessment

This section will provide an overview of some of the key issues in assessment, focusing on assessment criteria, a discussion of the debates about formative assessment, summative assessment, and the role that these two forms of assessment play in the current HE system. Lastly, a thorough analysis of the various types of assessment in a number of HEI’s in the UK, as well as some reference to non UK university practices is provided. Boud (1999) argues that:

Assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor (1).
Brown (2006) argues that assessment defines what students regard as important, and how they come to see themselves as students, and then as graduates. Students take their cues from what is assessed, rather than from what lecturers assert is important. Brown also argues that ‘poor assessment design will lead students to behaviours that are counter productive to learning’ (1), with students encouraged to learn by rote, rather than reflecting on what it is they are learning. As Challis (2005) argues, this type of rote learning can be readily forgotten, and does not encourage deeper learning or prepare students for professional life. He points to the pressure in recent years for HEI’s to be able to assess a much broader range of student abilities. Brown et al (1994) argue that it is important to step back and ask this question:

> There are times when we become so immersed in the job that we lose exact sight of the exact purpose of a particular element of assessment. There is then the possibility that we are not achieving that purpose, or that we overlook another form of assessment which might be more appropriate (2).

Some reasons for assessment may be:

- Motivation
- To create learning activities
- Feedback to the student, identifying strengths and weaknesses
- Feedback to the staff on how well the message is getting across

(Ciel Language Support Network, 2000)

Black and William (1998) conducted a meta-analytic review of over 250 studies of formative assessment with feedback spanning all educational sectors. Formative assessment was shown to raise standards and feedback produced positive benefits on learning and attainment in all content areas, knowledge and skill types at all levels of the educational system.

Elwood and Klenowski (2002) argue that for students to be effective learners, they need to understand assessment criteria. Stephani (1998) also argues this, stating that it is important that tutors and students share their ‘conceptions of the teaching and learning contract’ (339) to help students develop as learners. Thus, there has been a recent drive to make assessment criteria more transparent to students and tutors (Rust
et al, 2003). When discussing tacit professional knowledge Rust argues that assessment criteria is ‘something that we know but we find impossible or, at least, extremely difficult to express’ (2003; 152). Biggs (2003) argues that students are motivated partly by whether they have some expectation of success. The authors point out that by providing clearly defined and meaningful criteria, students will develop the expectation that they can succeed in their studies.

Several authors have argued that students should be actively involved in constructing assessment criteria (Habeshaw et al 1993, Brown and Knight, 1994). However, research by Orsmond et al (1996) and Rust (2002) shows that even when criteria was clearly defined, students still differed in their understanding of the criteria. A study by Orsmond et al (2000) showed that agreement between student and tutor marking was not enhanced when students themselves contributed to the construction of assessment criteria. They concluded that there was no evidence that student-generated criteria improved the student’s understanding of the criteria or how they should use them. They point out that in some disciplines, students may not have the knowledge to apply the criteria correctly, and they may not be able to spot deficiencies in knowledge as well as tutors are able to.

Research by Rust et al (2003) showed that novice (first year) students tended to focus on ‘visible’ criteria such as presentation, whereas tutors are more likely to focus on ‘invisible’ criteria such as analysis. However, the same study, based on a large sample of business studies students, showed that engaging students in the process did mean that students significantly improved their grades in future assignments. Webster and Pepper (2000) undertook a project which aimed to test whether students were being given adequate guidance on writing their undergraduate dissertations. They based their findings on a number of sources; the gathering of publishable literature and guidance given to students within the school and the schools’ seven departments, content analysis of dissertation report forms, a questionnaire administered to school staff, and interviews with academic staff. They found that although most students were given very good guidance (regarding assessment criteria), there were also some worrying instances of students being given little or no guidance, although this occurred in a minority of cases. In addition, even where students were given good guidance, they were not told about the relative importance of each criterion, for
example, how criteria was weighted. It was found that only one of the seven
departments provided a detailed guide to students, giving information about the
relative importance attributed by markers to each criterion used. Other departments
seemed to work in a ‘holistic’ way, using criteria to rationalize an overall mark. The
authors point out that this approach may be seen as advantageous from the assessors’
point of view because it allows for more flexibility. In some cases, although students
were provided with clear guidelines and publishable criteria, the criteria were not used
by the staff when marking the dissertation. An analysis of comment sheets revealed
that some markers made comments that did not seem to relate to any published
criteria. Other problems relate to the marker’s value systems. For instance, some
markers felt that dissertations should address empirical issues, while others wanted
more emphasis on theory. There was also ‘some incongruity between the comments
made and the marks awarded’ (Webster and Pepper 2000: 76), one example being a
comment that said ‘this is a clear, well presented [dissertation] ….which fulfils its’
specific aims’ (76). However, the mark awarded was 49%.

The above findings suggest that even when criteria are clearly laid out and made
available to students, problems regarding the interpretation and application of
criterion can still occur. Webster and Pepper (2000) conclude that:

> even when particular qualities are sought and spelled out; different members
  of academic staff may mean different things by them (74).

They found, for instance, a number of different interpretations of the term ‘analysis’,
and ‘evaluate’, and that several other terms produced similar levels of ambiguity
among assessors. As the authors’ state:

> on almost every definition there was considerable variation between
  colleagues’ understanding of terms that are currently widely used (74).

Given the findings of this study, it would be extremely useful to further explore the
application of criteria in other institutions, and in a range of disciplines. This would be
helpful in trying to ascertain how consistently assessment criteria are applied.
6.1 Formative and summative assessment

Taras, in 2002, argued that there was little innovation in higher education assessment, and despite moves towards greater diversity in assessment in recent years, many authors have argued that this is still largely the case. It seems that there is a mismatch between ideas about student reflexivity, the student experience, and the increasing need to maintain accountability and measurable standards. As Taras (2000) says:

I would suggest that we are giving out contradictory messages. We have student-centred learning, on the one hand, and students as protagonists being excluded from the main role which is assessment, on the other (503).

It is not always an easy task to introduce new methods, as some of the examples provided here illustrate. However, most of the tutors who have been involved in doing so report a number of benefits in terms of the student experience. Such changes often require a shift in attitudes, by both tutors and students. It could be that despite significant efforts on the part of tutors, students do not respond as positively as expected. However, with good assessment design, and clear communication with students, many of these problems can be overcome.

The differences between formative and summative assessment are not always clear. Some assignments are deliberately designed to be both formative (the student is expected to learn from feedback) and summative (the grade awarded contributes to the overall mark). It is generally understood, though, that formative assessment is about the process of learning. It is concerned with ‘deep learning’, and the idea of reflexivity. The notion of students being more reflexive is based on the theory of experiential learning advocated by Lewin (accessed 19/05/06) and developed by Kolb (1984) and Schon (1984) and is a philosophy that allows the student to:

develop the capacity to learn, the capacity to learn how to learn [and ] the capacity to know what he has learned (Heron, 1988:78).
‘Formative assessment is a method designed to establish how much progress a student is making during learning with a view to giving feedback to the student’ (Ciel Language Support Network, 2000). Although it has been argued that assessment methods can largely be seen to shape an individuals’ approach to learning (Norton, 2004) some studies show that the methods adopted may not influence an individuals’ motivation as expected. Baggott and Rayne (2004) designed an evaluation to assess student perceptions of computer-based formative assessments, on a ‘semi-distant’ Field Biology module. This formative assessment was used to try to promote student’s understanding of topics, using a variety of feedback strategies, ranging from partial to total disclosure of question solutions. Student opinion divided into two categories, one view was that formative assessment helped them to understand the topic; the focus for these students was on learning and developing rather than grades. The opposing view was that formative assessment was useful mainly in helping students pass the summative element of the assessment. This demonstrates that, despite the aims of some tutors to focus on formative assessment, some students still focus almost exclusively on the summative elements. However, as individuals are bound to have different motivations, this is perhaps not surprising. It should also be noted that students can take time to get used to different ways of working, and that if they are exposed to various forms of formative assessment more regularly, they may change their approaches to it. The idea that students are largely focused on grades is not a new one. Yorke (2003) mentions the issue of ‘learned dependence’ with regard to feedback, a point made by Miller and Parlet (1974) whereby a student uses feedback to try to ascertain what it tells them about tutors’ expectations, thus becoming ‘cue-conscious’. Yorke (2003) argues that formative assessment is an important part of a students’ learning, and he urges higher education institutions to do more of it. However, he acknowledges that this involves cost and time implications. He therefore suggests a possible reduction in formal lecturing to save resources, arguing as Bligh (1998) does, that it is not a very effective method of student learning. He also suggests that greater exploitation of rapidly developing technology should be considered in helping universities offer formative assessment more easily.

Summative assessment is designed to establish what a student has achieved at the end of a unit or course. A final mark or grade is awarded (Ciel Language Support Network, 2000). Summative assessment generally provides a measure of the students’
success or failure and gives a measure of the level of attainment in the module or course. Maclellan (2004) points to the importance of summative assessment for both higher education institutions, and for students. There are, she argues, external pressures on higher education to see assessment as mainly summative, because it is ‘seen by policy makers as an agent of educational reform’ (313). Assessment can be seen as a mechanism by which graduates are prepared to take their professional place in society, which, Maclellan argues

necessitates benchmarks through which student entry, progress, qualification and graduation is recorded (p313).

6.2 Assessment methods

It seems clear from the examples discussed above that ‘traditional assessment’ (the unseen exam or essay) is still the dominant mode of assessment within higher education in the UK, although there are clearly moves to develop a wider range of methods. In a critique of this tradition, Lauvås et al (2000) argues against the assumption that the usual ‘unseen exam under strict control and time limits’ is necessarily the best and the most appropriate method. As Boud (1998) has argued, there is now a need to look at alternatives to this traditional model:

The unseen examination is the yardstick against which all assessment practices must be judged. This assumption has acted as the dead hand on assessment for many years. Thankfully, there are clear signs that it is in rapid decline (93).

Lauvås et al (2000) argue that these assumptions of the traditional ways of assessing limit our thinking by:

implicitly defining something as obvious and mandatory, excluding alternatives that could be taken into consideration (93).
The importance of choosing the most appropriate method for the subject being studied is a key theme in the literature. The environment in which the discipline is being taught will also affect assessment. Class size will have an impact on chosen assessment. Cook’s (2001) paper details a study, involving economics students, which evaluates a course with 900 students enrolled on it. Crisp & Lister (2002), in their review of assessment methods in social work, note that many of the methods used are in classes of no more than 20 or 25 students. In reality, they point out, social work classes may be much larger than this, meaning that some of the more innovative methods discussed are in reality too time consuming to be considered. Assessment must also be aligned with learning outcomes, the aims of the course, and with course curriculum delivery. It must be seen as part of a coherent whole, rather than being tacked on at the end (Brown, 2006).

6.3 Examples of Assessment Methods Used

6.3.1 Exams

Lauvås et al (2000), in their paper concerning inertia with regard to assessment in Norwegian universities, speculate on what assessors are trying to achieve when utilizing certain forms of assessment, such as exams. It is claimed, for instance that exams are important in terms of internal validity, standardization, objectivity and reliability. However, Raaheim (1999), a Norwegian academic, reported a severe lack of inter-examiner reliability in a psychology examination, but also that the most experienced examiners accept the existence of diversity in the marking of examination essays. He reflects that from the assessors’ point of view, this seems to be viewed as an acceptable situation, even perhaps an unavoidable one.

Hamilton (2005) carried out a study to ascertain the views of philosophers regarding the issue of assessment in higher education, and specifically, the issue of ‘objective’ testing in the assessment of philosophy. The author did this by circulating an e mail survey on a number of leading electronic mailing lists for philosophers. The definition of ‘objective’ testing in philosophy is not entirely clear, but it seems to be anything other than the standard unseen exam essay. He found that some academics within
philosophy believed that exam essays are the only way to test student comprehension. However, many philosophers also thought that exam essays were not conducive to philosophical thought. Other comments were based on the view that essay questions may be misleading, ambiguous, or biased, and that they can entail the student reciting, parrot fashion, their lecture notes. Students are known to memorise essays prior to exams. Lastly, Hamilton notes that US academics tend to be more favourable towards ‘objective’ (non-essay) testing than UK academics.

6.3.2 Portfolio assessment

Guard et al (2003) report on a case study within the discipline of languages and linguistics, where they introduced the concept of portfolio assessment. The authors note that portfolios are now more widely used within higher education, especially in the US. They can be seen to encourage student reflexivity, encouraging them to be more involved in their studies, be more creative, to develop self-evaluative skills, and to help prepare them for employment. Portfolios were described by Forgette-Giroux and Simon (2002) as a cumulative and ongoing collection of entries that are selected and commented on by the student, the teacher and/or peers, to assess the students’ progress in the development of a competency. A ‘portfolio culture’ has been described by the San Diego County Office of Education as being characterized by:

- Collaboration
- Students revisiting and revising work
- Students reflecting on work

Based on their case study, Guard and her colleagues highlight the importance of providing students with a set of clear criteria for assessment and the need to make the parameters of the assessment clear. Students must also be made aware of exactly how their portfolios will be marked. This is also important in terms of inter-rater reliability. The authors also report on the difficulty of marking objectively, pointing out that:
a need may arise to restructure the curriculum and adapt teaching methods to match the continuous and reflective nature of portfolio assessment. Educational systems for instance that are driven by ranking such as league tables and standardized tests will encounter problems with the less score based and mathematically accountable outcomes of portfolio assessment (2003: 3).

In terms of time and resources, Guard (2003) found that portfolio assessment tended to require more tutor input than conventional assessment. However, in this case the tutor found that ‘the use of peer feedback connected to quantitative marking a way to reduce the marking load’ (4).

Lastly, they discuss the issue of student’s attitudes towards the adoption of an ‘alternative’ assessment method, such as portfolio assessment. Such a change involves a change in attitude, by both tutors and students. Akar (2001) believes that the reason many Turkish students, for instance, resist portfolio assessment is because of the competitive nature of the Turkish university system. It could be that students within the British education system have similar views. Further research into this may help to develop an understanding of students’ attitudes towards collaborative working. It is likely that attitudes will depend on whether students are being awarded a summative mark as a group, or based on their individual contributions.

Guard et al (2003) found that an important motivational factor for students was their ability, with this type of approach, to connect learning and assessment to the ‘real world’. Students liked being able to choose their own topics, creating realistic scenarios based on their future employment choices. The authors did feel, however, that there is a fine line to be struck between ‘prescription and space for student choice and creativity’ (4).

Crisp and Lister (2002) briefly discuss the use of portfolios in the social work field. This method is used to document students’ developing knowledge and competence over the course in subjects such as group work and community organising. Guitierrez & Alvarez (2000) used such a method for their students whereby students assessed their own strengths, opportunities, obstacles and challenges, and fed information back to the group. The authors reported a high standard of work from students using
portfolios. However, other studies (Black, 1993) report low inter-rater reliability with this method. In addition, it is a very time consuming activity, both for the student and the assessor. It can produce a large amount of unwieldy material, especially if guidelines and criteria are not specific enough.

6.3.3 Peer assessment

Peer assessment is defined, by Falchicov (2001) as:

In peer assessment, members of a class grade the work or performance of their peers using relevant criteria. In peer feedback, students engage in reflective criticism of the work or performance of other students using previously identified criteria and supply feedback to them. In peer learning, students learn with and from each other, normally within the same class or cohort.

In his presentation about peer assessment (part of the Challenging Perspectives of Assessment series, 2006), Hughes, a pharmacologist based at Leeds University, outlines what he sees as some the main advantages of peer assessment:

- It is useful for students who will have to assess others work early in their careers and teaches them about critical appraisal
- Being able to assess others work helps students assess their own work, a key characteristic of scientific work
- They can learn about other student’s standards and from their mistakes
- His experience at Leeds has revealed that students who are exposed to peer assessment make improvements in writing up their practicals because of the experience it provides.

Of course, there are also disadvantages, some of which are based on the suitability of peer assessment for the particular task being assessed. He notes, for instance that whereas peer assessment has worked well with laboratory reports and presentations, it has not worked as well for essays. When peer marked essays were evaluated, a
significant discrepancy was found between peer marks and tutor marks. He argues that this can be explained by the use of marking schedules. For the essays, students could choose their own essay topic, meaning that marking schedules were not as explicit as for other tasks. He points out that staff are clearly experts in marking for content, whereas students may lack the knowledge to assess an essay in this way.

He goes on to argue that if using peer assessment, the process must be well managed in order to be effective. He suggests some practical tips for ensuring that this is the case:

- Initially, students can be sceptical, believing that they are doing the tutors job for them. Therefore, the reasons for using this method, and the process involved, must be very clearly explained to students
- Students must be given clear instructions and clear criteria.
- All papers must be handed in at the same time. At Leeds, there is a severe penalty for not doing so. All students must turn up for the marking session, and will lose 50% of marks for failing to do so.
- 10% of peer assessments are checked on a regular basis, and findings show that they fall within 3% of tutor’s marks.
- There is an appeal procedure, whereby a tutor will mark the paper if students are unhappy with their mark. In his experience, less than 1% of students appeal.

6.3.4 Examples of the Use of Peer assessment

Example I
Bloxham and West (2004) report on an exercise whereby sports studies students used assessment criteria to mark the work of their peers, coupled with an assessment of their peer marking and feedback comments. The authors carried out primary research to explore how involvement in the assessment process affected students’ perceptions and performance. The research project was a 24 week long, 2 hours a week contact time module in sports sociology, part of a BA (Hons) in Sports Studies. Part of the assessment involved a poster presentation, and it was this presentation that the project focused on. At the beginning of the course, students were given the poster title, key
concepts to include and guidelines for a successful answer. In addition, they were provided with the college wide marking criteria. For the first stage, students were given five hours of tuition from tutors about how to assess, and students had the opportunity to do some oral presentations. In stage two, students completed a poster presentation in pairs. This accounted for 40% of the total mark. Each pair of students blind marked two posters in one hour, completing the standard school feedback sheet. Marks for the poster presentation are derived from peer assessment (tutor moderated) of the poster (75%) and tutor marking of the feedback sheet written by students (25%) i.e. marking of the quality of the peer marking. In stage three, tutors moderated the marks awarded, according to usual school practice. Where student and tutor marks differed by more than 3%, students received the tutor mark. The marks were left unchanged where student and tutor marks were within 3%.

An evaluation of the project revealed that all but four of the twenty pairs of students mention that the assessment criteria helped them understand what tutors were looking for when assessing the posters. Hence students were ‘overwhelmingly positive about the helpfulness of the assessment criteria’ (726). Over two-thirds of students were positive about the experience of marking and being marked by their peers. One commented that it was ‘good practice and helps us learn what lecturers are looking for’, another that ‘you can see where you’ve gone wrong and where you can improve next time’ (728).

The innovative element of marking the students’ marking had some positive affects. It exposed students to the marking procedure, and appeared to increase student’s confidence in the peer marking process:

At the end of the process they were able to articulate what they needed to do to improve and were very positive about their intention to make changes in the future (Bloxham & West, 2004: 731).

From the tutor perspective, the project was very positive and was later adopted for future courses.
Example II

Orsmond et al’s (2002) article outlines a study exploring the role of exemplars in overcoming some of the problems previously identified with the method of peer assessment with regard to reliability (see Orsmond et al, 2000). This previous study by the same authors revealed that even when students and tutors jointly constructed marking criteria, this did not lead to a greater understanding of the marking criteria by students. Thus, they turn to a focus on exemplars to further explore the issue.

‘Exemplars’ have been defined by Sadler (1987) as ‘key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence’.

The study involved first year Environmental Science and Applied Biology undergraduates. They were shown ‘exemplars’, i.e. five histology posters from an earlier student cohort to indicate a range of previously graded material. However, these exemplars were used as illustrations of various styles without tutor comments about their various merits. This was designed to focus students’ minds on criteria construction, rather than tutors leading students as regards which criteria were the most important. Once the study had been evaluated, they found no significant differences between student and tutor marks. This contrasts with the author’s previous studies. Student feedback indicated that they viewed peer assessment as an important part of learning. Most would like the process of criteria construction to be introduced on other modules, although they found the process very challenging. The authors conclude that the use of exemplars do help students develop a better understanding of marking criteria and subject standards, and as such, can provide a useful form of formative feedback.

Example III

Langan et al (2005) also raise the issue of concerns within academia over the validity and reliability of alternative assessment such as peer assessment. This is due, they argue, to concerns about ‘inaccuracy and low precision of naïve markers’. It has also been reported that employers may also be concerned about some of the alternative assessment practices within universities, again, with peer assessment being an example (Freeman, 1995). However, several studies point to the effectiveness and reliability of peer assessment, providing that the study is well designed. Langan et al’s
paper looks at an under researched area; the differences in attributes of students and the way they assess each other. The study worked with students studying either environmental or biological sciences. The attributes considered in this study are:

- Gender
- Inclusion in the development of assessment criteria
- Students from different courses/departments/universities

The study involved the peer assessment of forty two presentations from students at two universities. Eleven tutors (from four universities) were involved in the process. The findings were as follows:

- Student assessors positively discriminated towards colleagues from the same university, leading to an increase in marks of 1.6%
- Male and female speakers received almost identical marks
- However, student assessors tended to award higher marks to speakers of the same gender (increase of 1.9%)
- Female markers were more consistent at awarding marks to both genders
- Male markers tended to award lower marks to female speakers
- This study found that those who had helped for the assessment criteria awarded marks which were closer to the tutors’ marks, and were therefore less prone to over marking than naïve assessors.
- Tutor marks were quite variable. Graduate research students working as tutors, awarded lower marks than permanent staff

The authors of the study make some general comments about their experiences of this project, and what the findings reveal. Firstly, they noted that students who were required to assess were generally more engaged and attentive, compared to previous courses. This is in line with Stefani’s (1994) findings that students appeared to be challenged more; they had to think more, and ultimately learnt when they participated in assessing their peers. They found that ‘over marking’ of five percent by students suggests a lack of accuracy, but that as there was a strong positive correlation between tutor and student marks, this could suggest that marks should be ‘calibrated’ (in this case, reduce the marks awarded). On the whole, the authors believe that the benefits of peer assessment far outweigh differences between student and tutor marks.
However, it does raise the question of whether the process is used for formative or summative assessment. It may be more appropriate to use peer assessment for formative purposes.

Wen and Tsai (2006) give a useful summary of what some authors see as some of the key issues in peer assessment. Although they report that on the whole, peer assessment helps students understand the role of teachers and the nature of assessment, previous studies (Brindley & Scofield, 1998; Cheng & Warren, 1997) show that students are very wary of receiving criticism from peers. Other studies (Sullivan et al, 1999) reveal a lack of self confidence by students when rating their peers. However, students also report liking peer assessment as a general method of assessment as it allows them to compare their work with others. Other issues have also been raised. A qualitative study of peer assessment by Clifford (1999) reported that students often felt frustrated by the lack of clear guidance when using this as an assessment method. Also, in a study of group peer assessment (Johnson and Smith, 1997) female university students received lower marks than their male counterparts, even though marks from staff were higher than for males.

6.3.5 Self-Assessment

Few articles on self assessment were found and it does not appear to be a widely used method. Where it is used, it will more likely be for formative, rather than summative assessment.

Struyven et al (2005) examined student’s perceptions and perceptions of different assessment methods. Mires at al (2001) carried out a study where students self assessed an exam, with serious consequences. It was found that students were preoccupied with whether they would fail or not, and that this affected their ability to assess.

An article produced by the UK Centre for Legal Education based at the University of Warwick focusing on self-assessment and its relevance to students studying law,
argued that exposure to subjectivity is particularly useful for students in law, because of the nature of the law itself, and the element of interpretation involved developing cases (accessed 19/05/06). Self-assessment is seen by Sadler (1989) as an ‘apprenticeship in judgment’. When students graduate and work as professionals within the law they will have to make legal decisions about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Thus self-assessment is seen as particularly valuable.

Studies differ in the approach to setting criteria for self-assessment. Some studies have students setting their own criteria, while in other cases, the tutors do so. Another approach is for students and tutors to collaborate in the generation of assessment criteria. In a study by Stanton (1999) it was found that when staff and students collaborated regarding criteria, there was an 80% agreement of grades. This suggests that the students’ role in setting criteria is an important factor, and students felt that they had had some sense of ownership in the process.

Boud and Falchikov (1989) carried out a study of self-assessment to explore the consistency of staff/students marks and to look at issues of validity. They worked on the hypothesis that under-achievers would over-rate themselves, but did not find this to be the case. Boud and Falchikov’s findings tend to indicate that the area of study (the subject or discipline) influences how students perceive self-assessment, and therefore how well it works. In other words, it may lend itself to some disciplines more easily than others. As argued above, self-assessment is seen as useful and relevant in areas such as law and other subjects where reflexivity is seen as a significant part of the learning process.

Crisp and Lister (2002) point to the innovative use of self-assessment in a social work course:

One interesting example of self-assessment involved students on a course on racism and oppression being given a blank audiotape and an interview guide and required to discuss their experiences of racism after the first class. Near the end of the semester, the tapes are returned and the students are required to reflect on how their responses to racism have changed over the course in a written paper, using the tape as a baseline measure (Millstein, 1997).
The authors report that self-assessment in social work tends to be used as a learning method rather than an assessment tool. It is useful in documenting students understanding of what they have learned. If used for assessment, this would be formative, rather than summative. However, they do point out that if self-assessment was used in every task it could result in assessment fatigue.

6.3.6 Use of Technology and its Impact on Assessment

Increasingly sophisticated technology can help save time and resources, especially where there are large numbers of students on a course, and is invaluable when utilised for independent learning or distance learning courses. Lastly, it can help in providing innovative forms of assessment which would previously have been impossible. Some authors argue that technology should be harnessed within higher education, in order to provide more sophisticated and timely methods of assessment and feedback. Brown et al (1999) argue that:

The power of networks to transfer, upload and download data automatically should also be exploited. The benefits….of receiving specific, timely and encouraging feedback are utilized by only a few. The advantages of detailed feedback on student and group performance, delivered rapidly enough to allow academics to deal with student misconceptions during a module and enhancing student learning, are yet to be achieved (Challis 2005:197).

Ahmed (accessed 19/05/06) outlines a project within the School of Engineering and Built Environment which aims to introduce computer aided assessment (CAA) tools to facilitate learning and to assess students. The project is at a fairly early stage and is currently being developed further. The CAA software can be used by students in a number of ways, for instance to do quizzes or answer multi-choice questions. Feedback is given to students immediately online, meaning that it forms part of formative assessment very quickly, with students able to find out if they are on the right track in their learning. As results are stored on a database, it also allows
summative marks to be gained very easily, with information given on individual students’ scores. The author points out that it is not the intention that any one topic will be fully assessed in this way, or that CAA will be a substitute for classroom teaching. It is, however, useful in allowing students to self-evaluate, to pre-test their knowledge, or to ‘post-test learning’.

Example I
A paper by Barak and Rafaeli (2004) outlines a new method for both learning and assessment on a postgraduate MBA course. Students carried out an on-line Question-Posing assignment (QPA) whereby they post questions on-line in order to interact with peers and to promote reflexive learning. In other words students were asked to contribute questions for public use. They were also asked to rate their peer contributions. The On-line QPA was graded for quality and persistence. The aims of this approach were to integrate learning and assessment. This type of assessment focuses on the process of learning as well as the evaluation of the work itself. It changes ‘passive students to active participants who share responsibility in the process, practices self-assessment and collaboration’ (3). There are three types of assessment used for the course: peer assessment, self assessment, and achievement assessment (the latter being assessed via an online exam). With regard to peer assessment, it is notable that students were not given criteria by tutors, but instead had to devise their own criteria.

The Question Sharing and Interactive Assignments (QSIA) system enables the administration of assignments and tests under a variety of contexts. Tests can be done on or offline, in proctored or individual settings, with or without time limits, and with open or closed book exams. The researchers looked into the effectiveness of QSIA by analysing student questionnaires and found that overall, question posing in this way did help students achieve better learning outcomes. It helps contribute to high level thinking skills, and problem solving. Students were generally positive about QSIA and QPA, and indicated that they would like to see it used on other courses.
Example II

Challis (2005) details a method of ‘adaptive online assessment’, a particular method of online assessment whereby the online test being done by students adapts to the students level of expertise. In other words, the system ‘adapts’ to the user:

The distinctive element of adaptive testing is that, as the students respond to test items, the items change to reflect the performance on the preceding item(s). This means that, by using a statistical method of discovery, any adaptive test is designed on the requirement that the level of the user is constantly established. Commencing at a moderate level, as the user answers question items become more difficult/complex or easier, depending on the demonstrated level of answer (521).

Challis points out the need to differentiate between online assessment tools. Not all of them (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard, QUIZIT) are adaptive. They are fixed, and do not adapt or respond to the user. It is also important to consider whether online systems are to be used for formative, or for summative assessment. Adaptive systems are particularly effective in helping with formative learning and assessment. It can help tutors support learners and direct the learning process. Adaptive systems can therefore offer a very effective diagnostic tool. Challis sees a number of benefits in this assessment tool. Firstly adaptive testing is more tailored to the individual students’ needs/level of expertise. Secondly an online exam can also offer the students a number of complex scenarios using interactive resources (images, sounds, simulation). So, although this type of exam is more time consuming to set up than a conventional exam, it can test a variety of skills and knowledge. When used formatively, it can help students who are reluctant to show gaps in their knowledge or areas of weakness. They can learn in their own time and from their mistakes without feeling inadequate among tutors and peers. Finally for tutors and assessors, it can be efficient; because once the system is set up similar tasks can be repeated with other cohorts with minimal adjustment. Challis points out that:

where gaps and weaknesses are exposed, remediation can be provided through embedded feedback and assistance which can be prepared
once and then accessed as frequently as needed without drawing on lecturer’s time (524).

The article also provides some useful guidance about issues of security, including ensuring candidate validity, divulging of content, and intellectual property protection, and cheating (525-526).

Nicol (2006) gives case studies of how ICT can be used to maximise the use of formative assessment in large first year classes. The case studies discuss the issue of assisting students to be self-regulated autonomous learners who take responsibility for their own learning.

**Example III**
Lea (2001) reports on students’ use of computer conferencing on an on-line MA course at the Open University. The module (Applications of Information Technology in Open and distance Education) is worth 60 credits (one third of the MA). The paper outlines how this method is used as a new form of learning but also as a new form of assessment. The course is taken by students located in various countries, and who have diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

The author looks mainly at the relationship between conferencing and students’ written work. She is also concerned with issues of reflexivity and how students learn. One of the aspects of the assessment strategy for the module requires that students include extracts from relevant online discussions. It requires that students quote messages in a certain format as contributions towards these discussions form part of a summative assessment. Students are given clear guidelines about how marks will be apportioned. The OU guide states that marks will be allocated on the following basis:

- The extent to which your own messages have contributed to the online debate, that is expanded or commented on the views of other contributors (30 per cent)
- The way in which you draw on the resources of the course: the set book, the audiocassette, other papers or journal articles (30 per cent)
- The coherence of your argument about the question set (30 per cent)
• The style and presentation of your essay

Specific guidelines are given for Tutor Marked Assignments. The author cites an example for one assignment on the course to illustrate how assessment is done, and what guidelines students are given:

You are asked to write an essay of 2,000 words based on one of the issues debated online in your tutor group….Marks will be given for including at least five messages of your own from the debate, and for commenting on key points made in the debates in your tutor group (Lea 2001:165).

She acknowledges that one of the reasons that students contribute a great deal to conferencing for this module is that it explicitly forms part of the assessment process, although the students are in fact a highly motivated group of postgraduates who already have an interest in this type of learning. She states that ‘the primary rationale for linking students’ use of the conference to assessment was to encourage students to use the conferences as fully as possible’ (178). In this regard, it appears to have been very successful.

As discussed, some academics are beginning to harness technology in order to provide students with a range of learning methods, and to help tutors assess a large and diverse range of students. It would be useful to explore this issue further.

It would be helpful to note a word of warning however, with regard to the use of technology in exploring methods of ‘alternative assessment’. In their paper about the use of digital portfolios Woodward and Nanlohy (2004) argue:

One of the inherent dangers with digital portfolios is that the technological novelty of the product could overshadow the purpose of the portfolio. The danger is that learning to use the technology itself could then subsume the learning opportunities of portfolio construction (227).

This point is equally relevant to all other forms of assessment in which technology plays a large part.
6.3.7 Group Work

Example I
Laybourn et al’s (2001) article outlines the details of a project which assesses the group work of students through the involvement of employers. To contextualise this, the authors note that some studies (Gibbs et al, 1994, Harvey et al, 1997) found that employers particularly value generic skills such as group work. It was therefore thought that an opportunity for students to engage in ‘real world experience’ would be valuable, in terms of transferable skills and preparation for employment.

The study involves the development of group working skills in undergraduate students. It aims to encourage students to develop reflexivity by introducing them to various methods of assessment, in particular formative assessment. Employers are involved by observing students working in groups, and these employers feed back their comments to students, face to face. Students come from a range of courses (BSc Mathematics students, BA Social Science students on a cognitive psychology module, and BA Hospitality Management students). All students completed a 59-item group skills self-assessment inventory, before and after the project was undertaken. The inventory assesses eight categories of group working skills:

- Communication skills;
- Observation skills;
- Problem-solving skills;
- Morale building skills;
- Emotional expressiveness skills;
- Facing and accepting emotional situations;
- Social relationships;
- General skills.

The study found that gender appeared to have an impact, with females rating themselves significantly more highly on emotional expressiveness than males, but significantly lower than males on facing and accepting emotional situations. They also tended to lack confidence in judging their skills overall. Age, however, had no impact on responses.
To conclude, the authors thought that the:

Practice of bringing in employers to provide feedback on team-working skills is a very valuable and valued experience for students. The practice has been shown to be applicable to a variety of subject areas and to students in years two, three, and postgraduate (Laybourn et al 2001: 378).

They found that the experience of working on a team project increased students’ rating of their team skills and their confidence in assessing them.

The biggest improvements reported…appear to be in problem solving, communication and social relationship skills (378).

Example II
Winstanley (1992) reports on the use of group work as an important way of developing a range of transferable skills, and as a method of assessing the work of theology students at the University of Lancaster. Initially, because group work was a new assessment method, there were concerns, among both tutors and students about how it would be assessed, especially how marks would be apportioned among the group. As well as being assessed on the usual criteria such as analysing material, and deploying evidence, it was decided that students also needed to demonstrate collaborative working, computer literacy, and the presentation of material to non-academic audiences. Collaboration within groups was assessed as follows:

The degree of collaboration within a group is judged from the tutor’s observation, verbal feedback from students and reports which each individual in the group is required to submit as an element of assessment (61).

As well as providing a chance for student reflexivity, such reports provide information on group dynamics. This information was found to be invaluable for assessors for arriving at assessments of individual and collective achievements.

Additional assessment methods (to supplement academic assessments) involved asking the opinions of individuals and organisations outside the university who are
qualified to comment on the work. For instance, the Catholic Diocese’s study centre commented on the quality of a promotional video. The curator of the city museum submitted a written report on a manuscript submitted for assessment. These comments were sent to external examiners along with the tutor’s assessment. In addition, the supervisor provides a detailed report of the project. This describes the context of the project undertaken, including any problems encountered, and sets out the main criteria for assessment. Assessment is therefore based on a wider range of material and supporting documents than on traditionally examined courses.

6.3.8 Further Examples of Different Assessment Methods

This section will look at some isolated examples of assessment methods used in a variety of disciplines, including economics, social work and law.

Oral assessment
This method is seldom written about but one report does provide some useful guidance, based on the experience of law tutors assessing their students. In the article ‘Innovation in assessment’ (accessed 19/05/06) the authors point out that although oral skills can be seen as a key skill for lawyers, there is little written about how they should actually be assessed. In order to explore this issue the author asked students from a range of disciplines, the following question: ‘how do you know when you have learnt or understood an aspect of the programme you study?’ They found the most common answer to be ‘when I can talk about it’. Thus, students realise that if they can explain a subject to someone else, they are likely to have fully understood it. Oral assessment then can be seen as an effective way of testing whether a student fully understands, and has engaged with, the subject. It is not, though, seen by students as an easy option. In fact, the students found oral assessment particularly challenging.

The assessment of presentations
Dobson (2006) looks at the use of PowerPoint as an assessment tool in an undergraduate Bachelors degree in Travel and Tourism at a Norwegian university. Students were required to carry out a PowerPoint presentation that was intended to be
used in both formative and summative assessments. Once students had given the presentation lecturers gave feedback, and students then had two days to refine their presentation before handing it in. One of the goals of this approach was to allow students to learn from each other. However, as Dobson reports, few students attended the later presentations, perhaps an indication that they did not feel they were learning a great deal from the presentations of their peers. In sum, the author found that students did appear to develop their knowledge and skills as a result of doing the presentation, thus the exercise was valid in terms of formative assessment. Clarity of requirements was found to be essential for success in this approach. Lastly, it can be argued that one of the key ‘soft skills’ that students learned from this experience was the ability to present in front of an audience. This is clearly a useful skill in many types of professional work, and helps students develop an important skill that is transferable to many other situations.

Problem based learning (PBL)
Norton (2004) explores a new method of assessment which she introduced on a counselling psychology module at Liverpool Hope University. Assessment was based on problem-based learning, a method which has been used in the fields of medical education (and originated in the McMaster University Medical School in Ontario, Canada). It presents problem based scenarios to students who then work through them, identifying their own learning needs, and presenting solutions to problems. She sees this as very relevant to counselling because students need to be trained to work as professionals, and thus learning and assessment must be related to their future working lives. PBL is used in a variety of other disciplines such as engineering. Biggs (2002) argues:

In PBL, the aim is to produce graduates who can solve professional problems…the assessment is judging how well they have solved them (1).

Norton believes that students can be encouraged to be less mechanistic in their approach to learning if assessment criteria is re-conceptualised as ‘learning criteria’. She argues that students focus on the ‘Rules of the Game’ (ROG), and that students concentrate on the superficial and not deeper learning. They tend to be strategic, and ‘marks-orientated’. This is not surprising, she argues however, given that most
academics tend to view assessment as a means of certifying and grading students. The author posits the view that most assessment methods tend to encourage a ‘mechanistic’ approach in students. She therefore tests this hypothesis by re-designing the counselling psychology module, getting rid of the exam element and instead, introducing 100% coursework.

Results were mixed, and a number of problems arose, causing her to rethink her approach. When given additional assessment criteria, students tended to get more anxious, leading them to concentrate on trivial issues. Despite the aims to ‘deliberate pedagogic strategy’…to use assessment criteria as learning criteria… students still were actively ‘cue seeking’ and were grade orientated. She concludes that the research:

illustrates the difficulties of grafting on an innovative curriculum into a programme that is more traditional and where assessment is seen as a traditional product-based rather than process-based (14).

Short assignments
Hatt (2002), as an economics lecturer found that shorter assignments can be an effective summative assessment tool. She argues that if tutors rely too heavily on essays, a wider range of skills are not tested. She points out that the standard 1500 word essay is usually used only once per module, and does not therefore allow much chance for students to develop in a formative sense. Hatt decided to change the assessment method on a level two course, from one essay at the end of term, to four short pieces of work of 350-400 words. The paper would require students to provide a succinct answer to a specific question previously discussed at seminar. Each piece of work was marked against specific criteria given to students in advance. Work had to be submitted within two weeks of the seminar, and was returned within 10 days. The work replaced the end of term essay and counted for 25% of final mark for the module.

Hatt reports on the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. The advantages are that the method:
• Helps students develop both subject specific and transferable skills.
• Encourages students to engage continuously with the subject (economics is a cumulative subject, where certain basic principles must be understood, before going on to further study, so this is a big plus).
• Students were encouraged to get involved in seminars, knowing they would be writing about the subjects. They tended to do more reading, and ask more questions.
• Regular feedback led to an improvement on end of term essays, and was therefore useful for formative assessment.
• As the same criteria were used each time, students got used to the criteria and improved in terms of self assessment (prior to submission).
• Students learn clear and concise writing. In fact it can be harder to write a shorter piece of work, and students have to be much more focused and use only relevant material.

The disadvantages are that the method takes up a lot of staff time, partly because setting short questions is a new skill that tutors have to learn, and that it is impractical for large numbers of students. However, in sum, Hatt found that:

it was worth the additional workload in the early stages to see the benefits in terms of improved student learning (3).

Flexible assessment
Cook’s (2001) article explores the assessment of a quantitative analysis course within the School of Economics at University of Queensland. A system of ‘flexible’ assessment was introduced whereby students had some element of choice over what types of coursework were used to make up their summative assessment. Whereas the more traditional end of semester exam was still used, an element of Computer Managed Learning (CML) was introduced as well, and this formed part of the summative assessment. This was introduced in the first semester of 2000. As the course has 900 students enrolled on it, students come from a number of backgrounds
and have a wide variety of attitudes to learning. One of the aims of this flexible assessment was therefore to address the needs of this wide range of students.

In this course the CML programme uses WebCT in two ways: for quizzes and for a bulletin board. It allows students to interact with other students and to comment on topics and make connections between topics on the course. With the quizzes, students can test out whether they know the answers to questions. There are only right or wrong answers so this also helps give students feedback and they can learn from their mistakes.

The way flexible assessment works is that students at the end of the semester are given the best mark of the following 4 options:

Option 1: end of semester exam 100%
Option 2: end of semester exam 75%, mid semester exam 25%
Option 3: end of semester exam 85%, CML 15%
Option 4: end of semester exam 60%, mid semester exam 25%, CML 15%

Cook argues that allowing students choices over how they are assessed promotes learning, and allows students to experience the consequences of their choices. Students have a choice over whether the CML quiz forms part of their summative assessment, and a choice over how much time they spend on it. This allows some self reflection. Because the quiz is graded immediately online, students get immediate feedback which is useful for their learning and development.

Student opinions were canvassed after the module had ended. All students said that CML had been a positive experience and had helped them to learn and understand the work. No student complained that too much time was spent on the quizzes. In fact, because they were not compulsory, those who felt they were too much effort could elect not to take them. Students who opted for the more varied assessment found that they were less stressed then usual because they were able to spread the assessment throughout the term.
The assessment of student ‘proctors’

A paper by Hayler (2005) discusses a new form of assessment, introduced in the school of philosophy at Leeds university in 2002; the role of proctor. A proctor is an experienced (third year) student who runs discussion groups for first and second year students, acting as the chair of the group. Their role as proctors forms part of summative assessment. The author argues that discussion is considered to be an integral part of a philosophy course, and therefore this type of assessment is seen as particularly relevant within the discipline as a whole. It also helps proctors develop transferable skills.

Proctors receive six training sessions before they take on the role, and assessment takes the following form:

- The proctorial role can count as 10 credits for assessment
- Students are asked to produce a 1500 word paper discussing issues arising from their role as proctor and what they had learned from the experience
- An example of an essay question would be: ‘the students arrive at their first proctorial unsure what a proctorial is, what will you tell them?’ Or ‘Certain students never participate. What do you do?’

As part of learning and assessment, students are encouraged to be reflexive about issues that arose during their sessions. Students reported positively about the proctorial role, feeling they had learned from it. The marks students received for undertaking the proctorial were relatively high (2:1 and above). By 2005, this form of assessment was in its third year, having been adapted slightly since its inception. The current strategy is as follows; ‘Proctors are given the assessment at the very beginning of the first meeting. It is used as a basis for the first four meetings, each problem scenario used as a jumping off point for discussion. Thus the assessment now structures the training’(5).
Critical incident analysis
Crisp and Lister (2002) carried out a literature review to explore some methods of assessment used in social work. One of the methods is ‘Critical incident analyses’, which involves the analysis of critical incidents in people’s lives, to gain an understanding of life experiences, especially from those from other ethnic groups. It has been used in the United States of America on Social work courses.

Journals
Another method cited by Crisp and Lister (2002) is the use of journals, which have been used in UK social work courses exploring anti-discriminatory practice, or cultural diversity. With this method, students are asked to keep a journal reflecting on issues associated with the course, including group dynamics (if group work is involved), course content, and reading, and their feelings about issues raised. Journals have been successfully used in other disciplines such as English Literature.

The writing of proposals
Again, Crisp and Lister (2002) also discuss the use of proposals. The development of a proposal by social work students can be an assessable piece of work, helping students apply a range of theoretical and practical knowledge, similar to the type of work they may be required to do after graduation. Moxley & Thrasher, (1996) report that student feedback for such a task was very positive, with students indicating that they had developed an understanding of planning and developing new social programmes, and in making grant applications.

Many of these methods are used in other discipline areas and academics will be able to judge which methods are applicable to their discipline.
7.0 Validity and reliability

It should be noted that validity and reliability are contested terms. Several scholars have ‘questioned the privilege accorded to traditional validity criteria such as reliability and generalisability’ (Shay, 2005, 664). Those who argue from an interpretivist perspective, claim that it is impossible to discover universals or laws. In a discussion about different interpretations of students work, Shay points out that some authors would argue that:

 differences between markers are not ‘error’, but rather the inescapable outcome of the multiplicity of perspectives that assessors bring with them (664).

However, as these concepts are often included in the discourses surrounding student assessment, they will be explored here. Maclellan’s (2004) paper explores the efficacy of alternative assessment when used summatively. She challenges the validity of much alternative assessment, and argues that much of the literature on the subject raises important issues of validity. She argues proponents of alternative assessment claim that formative assessment is of utmost importance, and that student’s needs are paramount. Alternative assessment ‘essentially privileges the students’ own conceptualisations of their experiences. The dominance given to interpretations of their world is well suited to formative assessment’. The author argues however that it is problematic in terms of summative assessment:

 The literature also suggests that marker consistency is problematic because both how assessment performance is to be interpreted and the reliability with which persons can make interpretations is variously understood’. (p319). To conclude, Maclellan argues that ‘It would be cautious to conclude that while alternative assessment may be informative, its use for summative and accountability purposes is much less prudent (Maclellan, 2004:319).

Crisp and Lister (2002) note that although their literature search on assessment methods in social work provides some interesting examples of a wide range of
assessment methods, in most of the papers under review, there is little discussion of the effectiveness of these various methods. They point out that even though students may give positive evaluations of a particular method, it is not always clear whether students have clearly demonstrated an understanding or gaining of knowledge of the subject.

Other authors raise issues of validity, reliability and standardisation. Based on their study of peer assessment, Langan et al (2005) conclude that due to possible bias, peer assessment can be an effective formative tool but not a summative one. Similarly, Broad (2000) identifies a problem with regard to portfolio assessment in a writing programme within a U.S. university. It was found that although teachers wanted standardization of assessment, they found it difficult to agree on what attributes the most valuable in a text was. For instance:

one instructor was strongly against clichés, while another insisted on correct technical conventions, and another was more concerned about the vividness of the writing (407).

Webster and Pepper (2000), in their discussion of the application of assessment criteria in undergraduate dissertations, argue that:

It appears that for many academic staff there is some distaste for specified assessment criteria…such approaches are thought to be formulistic, constraining, and artificial (even capable of producing a final mark which bears little relationship to anything which would be given in other circumstances (76).

They point out that some academics appear to be resistant to ideas of validity and standardisation, claiming that assessment should be akin to:

wine tasting - a high level of activity that requires continuous practice but that is pretty much impenetrable to the non-cognoscenti (De Vries, 1996, Wright, 1996).
7.2 The need for clear criteria

Clear criteria for assessment which students can understand and can explore is a significant theme in the literature. The lack of clear criteria, or the inability to communicate these criteria to students, accounts for many of the problems in any type of assessment. It could be argued that this is perhaps even more the case with more varied methods, because students are still acclimatizing to these changes, although increasingly students will have experienced a wide range of assessment methods at school level. Lea (2001), reports on computer conferencing on an MA course. She highlights the importance of written guidance at the outset of the task (in this case, an on-line computer based project), detailing what assessors are looking for and how criteria will be weighted.

7.3 The need for a holistic approach

Norton (2004) highlights the need to take a holistic approach when describing some of the problems which occurred in her implementation of a problem-based learning task. She describes how, despite her efforts to discourage students from ‘cue seeking’, and being entirely grade orientated, they did not respond as she had hoped. She discusses the difficulty of introducing innovative assessment methods within traditional courses. It seems that students were still expecting a ‘product-based’ form of assessment rather than ‘process-based’ approach that the author was trying to achieve.

Macdonald (2006) in his presentation at the ‘Challenging Perspectives on Assessment’ conference discusses Biggs’ notion of constructive alignment, which is concerned with aligning learning, teaching and assessment. For example, if students are on a course where they are taught by problem based learning, which is a challenging and exciting approach, they may be disillusioned if assessed by a three hour exam. Students will get mixed messages.
Issues such as the timing of assessment are also important. Yorke (2003) argues that timing needs to be built into curriculum design. HEIs ‘should emphasise formative assessment at the end of the first semester of full-time study…in a partially diagnostic way [to help]…students feel more supported and not disheartened’ (490). He points out that as non-completion of courses is a problem in HEIs, this would also help the HEI itself.

There is clearly a need therefore to consider the issue of assessment holistically, and to attempt to find the most appropriate method for the task being assessed, rather than assuming that there is a ‘best’ method.

Hughes (2006) in his outline of a peer assessment project pointed to the fact that peer assessment worked well with lab reports and presentations, but not for essays, because students found it hard to mark for content of essays, a task which staff are experts in doing.

Lastly, Brown (2006) offers some practical suggestions for assessment which are generally applicable to all subjects, and tasks:

- Set small early assessed tasks, both formative and summative, at the early stages of programmes to help students learn what is expected of them
- Turn round assignments fast in the first semester
- Make more time available for feedback, but not in ways which make tutors feel overwhelmed
- Look at things like mass feedback, computer based feedback, feedback orally in groups
- Computer based feedback can save a lot of time, and be effective in replacing tutor marking (if it just a matter of right or wrong)
- Save tutors energy to make the more complex decisions about qualitative knowledge
- Plan to maximize the impact of feedback by making students do something with it
• Get feedback to students fast, perhaps using emailed group responses after submission of work, or discussion boards.

8.0 Assessment across the Disciplines

This section will provide brief accounts of methods used in three different subjects: Languages and Linguistics, Law, and Geography.

Example I: Good Practice in Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies

Söntgens (2003) *Portfolio of Independent Learning* at the University of Central England)

This case study outlines an assessment approach using a portfolio of independent learning based on the TransLang approach. This approach is designed to help develop the transferable skills of language students (studying German, French and Spanish at post A level). Learning is centred on a Divisional Website (http://bssstudents.uce.ac.uk/dlib), set up in 1999. The website is based on Kolb’s (1984) ideas of experiential learning. Kolb’s ‘learning cycle’ has been adapted by the Learning Methods Unit (LMU) at UCE.

It is based on the view that ‘the learner must make the link between theory and practice through active experimentation and through reflection on the learning process’.

One of the main aims of this portfolio work is to develop the transferable skills and employability skills of undergraduates. The portfolio consisted of a skills review, a compulsory review of language resources, and three tasks to be chosen by the student, including:

• Presentation skills, with or without PowerPoint
• Grammar (new task)
• Conversation (face-to-face, email tandems, or Internet chat)
• Website (TransLang)
• Listening skills (new task)
• Newspaper (TransLang)
• Essays/reports (new task)
• Intercultural awareness (new task)
• Open task (new task)

Students were required to submit on three separate dates throughout the semester, to encourage the spreading out of work for students, and to allow tutors time to give feedback.

At the end, students submitted the portfolio along with a final self-evaluation, in which they reflect on the process of constructing a portfolio.

**Assessment**

The portfolio was tutor assessed. It was thought that self-assessment was too big a step for students at this stage, as marks were summative. The whole module was assessed by 100% coursework, as follows:

Portfolio 30%
Oral Presentation 20%
TV writing task 30%
Summary 20%

**Evaluation**

The project evaluation was based on student questionnaires and focus groups. On the whole, results were positive, with students welcoming the use of portfolios. The reasons given for this positive response were:

• Individual choice of tasks
- Enhanced motivation to carry out self-selected tasks
- A focus on weak skills without necessarily losing marks
- The development of transferable skills, such as self-management (organisation and time)
- Web and IT skills
- The development of presentation skills

The most cited negative factor was the time consuming nature of the portfolio task.

**Assessment Outcomes**

The pass rate for portfolios in all three languages was high. It was found that marks for portfolios were comparable with marks for other assessed work. Tutors thought that it benefited weaker students, who, with guidance, performed better in portfolio work than other language assignments. It was also felt that all students had benefited from focusing on weaker skills, and that students had gained in confidence.

In sum, the author thought that students had gained more in terms of transferable skills than language skills. Some students thought that the time consuming nature of the portfolio detracted somewhat from actual language learning.

8.2 Example II: An overview of Assessment in Law


This article is a good overview of issues in law, with a useful section on assessment. It is based on primary research, including interviews with academic staff, and students.

Clegg notes that based on her sample, only a very small range of assessment methods are used in undergraduate law. The standard assessment for most courses is an examination and one or two written pieces of coursework. Some schools assess by 100% examination.
The rationale for exams as a form of assessment

When interviewed, staff gave a number of reasons for their use of exams:

- They were concerned with upholding standards and tend to interpret institutional requirements in traditional ways
- They believed that exams were a good way to test students’ understanding of the law
- There was scepticism of other methods, especially concerning authenticity and plagiarism
- One tutor said that exams helped to consolidate the course, whereas with essays, students could choose just one topic, narrowing their knowledge of other topics
- A Head of department believed that exams were favoured by the legal profession, who are suspicious of other forms of assessment

However, not all tutors held these views about exams. Some viewed it as essentially a memory test. Others mentioned that students are now not used to taking three hour exams, because they no longer do so for A levels. Thus, students find it very difficult at undergraduate level when faced with exams in the first year.

Summative assessment

Although some use is made of moots, dissertations, project work and some reflective journals, these are rarely summative, but are used only formatively. Oral assessments were rarely used, and some tutors mentioned that it was thought that this would disadvantage students for whom English is a second language.

In general it seems that academics in law tend to ‘play safe’, being concerned about the validity of ‘alternative’ methods. There is also a concern about being accountable for assessment methods and outcomes.
Feedback
Clegg found that feedback was taken very seriously within law. Tutors made a great deal of effort to provide feedback, and innovative ways of doing this were being used in some law departments. For instance, one tutor took the five best essays from a cohort of undergraduate law students, and posted them on the intranet for other students to view, as an example of a model answer. Students can therefore see real examples of work which they can read and re-read at leisure. As well as feedback on individual essays, some lecturers also used lecture time to give general feedback to groups of students. However, feedback was never given on exams, even though this is the predominant form of assessment in law.

When questioned, all students, without exception, said that they would like to receive comments on their exam papers. In general, students reported that they found feedback too vague, and it seems that students in law are therefore not using feedback very effectively. Clegg also noted that tutors were finding in increasingly difficult to give individual feedback because of increased class sizes.

8.3 Example III: Environmental Sciences
Hughes and Boyle (2005) Assessment in the Earth Sciences, Environmental Sciences, and Environmental Studies, GEES

Students are required to produce an assignment based on ‘Learning by simulation: mass media portrayal of global climate change’. This is an example of an approach used as part of a module on ‘Environment, Politics and the Mass Media’ at the University of Greenwich. It was conceived by Peter Jones (Greenwich). It is taken by Geography and Environmental Science students. The aim of this task was to encourage students to explore what is often their ‘common sense’ view of science as ‘proven-knowledge, objective and value-free’. It therefore invites students to critique their views of science, by looking at public and media portrayals of science.

Students are asked to prepare a short (200-300 word) paper and a two minute oral presentation putting forward the viewpoint of a number of chosen actors (including activists, academics, journalists and corporate spokespersons). A debate is staged
whereby students take on a role or ‘position’ and thus argue against a peer who opposes their view.

The assignment is awarded a summative mark through two written outputs: a 250 word letter for a broadsheet newspaper or magazine, and a 500 word article for a tabloid newspaper, with students taking the position of the role they undertook in their presentation. Students are required to provide a bibliography of on-line and other sources used for the assignment.

The author argues that this type of assignment helps students ‘develop a critical appreciation of diverse points of view, together with a critical understanding of generic media devices used in the portrayal of current environmental issues’ (p25).

**9.0 Higher Education Academy Subject Networks**

A thorough search was carried out of each of the subject networks on the HE academy website ([www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)).

A great deal of diverse information is available on each subject site, and each discipline varies in how it displays its information and what resources are offered. Some subjects list ‘assessment’ very clearly on their home page (Physical Sciences), and many have assessment under ‘resources’, or ‘publications’ such as Engineering or Psychology. However, as each subject centre differs, it is advisable to use ‘assessment’ as a key search term as well, even if assessment is clearly marked on the home page. In most cases, this key word search reveals an extensive amount of useful information on student assessment.

Resources will either be generic or subject specific. Although the subject network sites tend to hold a lot of useful subject or discipline specific information on assessment and other issues, many of the links do refer to general HE resources. This is worth bearing in mind when moving around the site as the amount of information can get confusing because there are such a wide range of links available. An example
of a generic resource is the LTSN network (Learning and Teaching Support Network). This, for instance, is provided as a link from the engineering, information and computer Sciences and the physical sciences subject networks.

It is notable that few of the subject networks had a good practice guide on assessment or any kind of publication which explores good practice in that subject area. The information provided by many of the subject networks, although very informative, tended not to be contained on one document. Rather, there was a variety of separate resources which could be accessed from a number of sources. These resources covered the following type of information, or link.

- Documents giving academics advice on assessment in the subject area. These are often written by individual tutors in a number of different universities. These tend to detail the use of innovative methods, case studies and evaluations, and advice for new tutors.
- Journal articles on assessment issues.
- Links to conferences or consortiums on assessment (see further references at the back of this report).
- Good practice guides for some subjects

It is also worth noting that the subject centre draws on practice in different countries.

It is not possible to explore all these resources in this report, but the next section will look at a selection of subjects, to illustrate the type of information available.

The law network home page is very useful. When visiting the site you are referred to ‘resources’, and then to ‘assessment’. This contains a list of resources in legal education (such as Assessment for learning: guide for law teachers (2002) - compiled by Alison Bone (University of Brighton) and Karen Hinett (UKCLE), and case studies (examples of innovative approaches to assessment in law). It also has generic information such as the ‘Higher Education Academy work on assessment of learning’

The Physical Science subject centre contains a document entitled ‘Designing Assessment to Improve Physical Sciences Learning’ (a LTSN Physical Sciences
This is an extensive document, which discusses and evaluates a range of assessment methods, including traditional exams, open book exams, essays, portfolios, presentations, vivas, and poster displays and exhibitions. Their website is easy to use, and there is a link to assessment on the home page.

The Engineering homepage also contains a number of very useful articles. A search under assessment reveals 107 hits, most of which are relevant. Examples of such articles are:

- ‘Assessing Materials students’ (Elton)
- Assessment: a guide for Heads of Department (Mutch & Brown)
- Designing assessment to improve physical sciences learning (Race)
- SNAS (Supporting New Academic Staff) online database
- Assessing group work (FTDL project at Sheffield Hallam)
- Enhancing student learning through formative feedback (Juwah et al)

The resources section on the Information and Computer Sciences homepage has a link to assessment. This refers the reader to a list of generic sources (clearly labelled as generic, rather than subject specific). This contains articles such as ‘Assessment issues arising from Subject Benchmarking Statements’ (Mantz Yorke), and ‘The Art of Assessing’ (Phil Race). There are separate subject specific sections for: General assessment, Computer-Aided assessment, Plagiarism Detection and Prevention, Assessment of Group Work, Assessment of Individual Project Work. Under these headings are a variety of articles about different assessment methods, their pros and cons, and further reading such as Isaacs, (2002) Assessing Group Tasks, and Arter et al, Portfolios for Assessment and Instruction.

Lastly, the Economics site has a six page handbook on Assessing alternative types of activity in economics. This document covers oral assessment, project work, multiple choice questions, literature reviews, computer-aided assessment, presentation, and portfolios in economics. There are some useful and easy to read boxed examples such as ‘Top Tips: Oral examinations’ and ‘Advantages of multiple-choice questioning’

The HE academy site is an excellent resource and is well organised and easy to use.
10.0 Comparator institutions

This section is not available via the web site.

11.0 Questions from the National Student Survey

In the National Student Survey (NSS) the section on assessment asks students to rate the extent to which they agreed with the following:

1. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
2. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
3. Feedback on my work has been prompt
4. I have received detailed comments on my work
5. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand

The literature on assessment and feedback previously discussed highlights a number of points relating to these statements.

1. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance

Webster and Pepper (2000), in their analysis of the marking of undergraduate dissertations, found instances of students being given no guidance in how their dissertations would be marked. In some cases, where students were given good guidance, they were not properly advised about the weighting of criteria.

Dobson (2006) outlines a study whereby students in travel and tourism gave a PowerPoint presentation which was to be used for both formative and summative assessment. Dobson raises the importance of defining the criteria to be used in assessment. It is important for students and tutors to know what they are attempting to assess. As this form of assessment was new to tutors, and was in its early stages, there was a lack of clarity about the criteria and their weighting. Dobson points to the importance of being clear about how content will be assessed, but also how
presentation skills will be assessed and weighted. One may expect that with this type of assignment, they are an important part of assessment. In the end students were only marked on content, as a grade was awarded on the basis of an electronic version of the presentation examined in the viva).

Bloxham and West’s study (2004) reveals student’s opinions about peer marking, and the use of assessment criteria. In the study students were asked about their views on the clarity of assessment criteria. In nearly all cases, students found it is extremely helpful to be given clear guidelines on criteria in advance. One student says ‘We looked at the task outline in the module handbook and religiously followed it’ (726). This pair (marking was done in pairs) were awarded 74%. Clearly, students were able to gain good marks by being made aware of criteria in advance, and in following it carefully. However, interestingly, another pair suggested that criteria:

outlined everything we had to include to obtain a good mark. In future perhaps less criteria should be given so we are made to think a bit more (726).

The authors point out that:

this view might be echoed by some tutors who are concerned that over-specification of assessment criteria encourages instrumentalism and deters more able students from extending themselves as they only focus on meeting the criteria (726).

This points to the need to provide a balance between giving the student clear criteria in advance, allowing them to gain the best possible mark, and providing an environment where innovation and creativity are encouraged.

2. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair

Findings from Webster and Pepper (2000), in the study cited above, showed how in some cases, although students were provided with clear guidelines and publishable criteria, the criteria were not used by the staff when marking the dissertation. It would be extremely difficult in these circumstances for students to judge whether they have
been marked fairly or not. This could an indication of a ‘hidden curriculum’, whereby inexplicit rules are being used.

The authors also discovered problems in how criteria were defined. For instance, certain terms, such as ‘analysis’ were interpreted very differently by different members of academic staff. It could be argued that if academic staff responsible for marking are unable to agree on such terms, it would be impossible for students to ascertain whether the assessment of their work has been fair.

3. Feedback on my work has been prompt

Higgins et al (2002) point out the importance of students receiving feedback in a timely fashion, if they are to learn from it. In modular degree programme for instance, it is fairly common for students to receive marked assignments, including feedback, some time after the module has finished. This means that students may not take the time to go back to that assignment and take on board the comments made.

Brown (2006) as discussed above, encourages tutors to explore innovative methods of feedback, such as mass feedback, computer based feedback, and feedback orally in groups. In her presentation, she urges tutors to ‘get feedback to students fast, perhaps using emailed group responses after submission of work, or discussion boards’, and to ‘turn round assignments fast in the first semester’ (42)

Other authors also explore the use of technology with regard to feedback. Cook’s (2001) evaluation of Computer Managed Learning (CML), whereby students take quizzes on-line, reveals how technology can be harnessed to provide immediate feedback, and thus help students in a formative sense (the quiz is graded immediately online). This type of feedback is really only appropriate where there are only right or wrong answers. However, for some subjects, such as economics, in which Cook’s study is based, it can prove very useful, and can cut down on tutor time.

4. I have received detailed comments on my work

63
There is a lack of literature on this point, although the students’ comments contained in Higgins et al’s work (2002), cited below, are very relevant (the two questions overlap to some extent).

McDowell (2006), in her presentation, considers the amount of detail that tutors should give students with regard to feedback. She argues that as subject experts, tutors should engage in providing feedback, not just on generic issues (as academics are often encouraged to do), but on making links between subject areas. If tutors engage with the ideas expressed in the assignment, as well as how students express these ideas, it would help students develop intellectually.

Lastly, it is noted that convention dictates that students never (or perhaps rarely) receive comments on examination papers. As examinations are a common form of assessment in higher education, students are missing out on an important aspect of feedback. Clegg (2004) interviewed law students and tutors with regard to their views about different assessment methods in the discipline. She found that all the students interviewed, without exception, said that they would like to receive comments on their exam papers. This is an area which could be explored further.

5. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) point to strong evidence that ‘feedback messages are invariably complex and difficult to decipher’ (201), and that the way in which students interpret feedback is affected by their belief systems. Thus students construct their own understanding of feedback messages. However, the authors point to considerable evidence gathered by Black and William (1998) in which they draw together information from over 250 studies of feedback carried out since 1988. Their research points to the efficacy of good feedback in helping students develop in their learning.

Higgins et al (2002) carried out a three year research project exploring the meaning of assessment to students. The study is based on a questionnaire and interviews with
students. They found that student’s experiences of feedback were mainly negative. An excerpt from one of the transcripts illustrates how feedback can be too vague to be of real help to the student. In recounting one piece of feedback received, a student says:

some of it was like ‘this line is immature’ which wasn’t particularly useful…the problem was that she didn’t specify what was wrong with it, she just said ‘this line isn’t right’, ‘this is wrong’, ‘this is very good’, ‘this introduction is unstructured’, but she didn’t say how it had become unstructured (Higgins et al:55).

Another student mentions that feedback on his essays contain comments such as:

‘your essay is good as far as it goes’. He goes on to say ‘it’s not particularly helpful because….it doesn’t tell you how far you could have gone…it’s a comment that isn’t particularly useful’ (55).

This illustrates how a lack of clarity in feedback can lead to the students being confused about exactly what is expected of them, and how they can improve.

In a different context, Baggott & Rayne (2004) used computer-based formative assessment to try to promote student’s understanding of topics in field biology. They found that using a range of computer based feedback methods, such as partial or total disclosure of question solutions, helped students develop a greater understanding of their work. This is an interesting approach because feedback was computer generated, rather than tutor generated.

12.0 Focus groups

The University of Sheffield was keen to get their own students’ views of assessment and feedback. Focus groups were identified as a way of gaining sufficient breadth across disciplines and sufficient student numbers across the University. Thirteen focus groups involving fifty one students from nine subject areas were conducted during
November 2006. The number of students participating in the focus groups varied by subject area and some groups were very small making analysis by subject group difficult. The research report is therefore written in generic terms, but in response to the University of Sheffield’s request for subject specific information we have provided this in the appendix.

In the subjects surveyed the following numbers of students participated: Architecture nine students; Chemical Engineering four students; French/Hispanic Studies nine students; History six students; Law nine students; Maths four students; MBB two students; Music five students; Psychology three students. Questions posed to the students were sectioned around each of the NSS questions relating to assessment and feedback and the results are presented accordingly below:

**Marking criteria**

Within the initial section of the focus group students were asked to respond to the first of the relevant statements in the survey which is ‘The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance’. This question presented little ambiguity of meaning for students. Invariably students considered the written guidelines and marking schemes made available to them.

Students were asked if they knew where to find this information. Almost without exception students knew that they could find the information in their student handbook and via the internet. A minority of students stated that staff informed them verbally about criteria used for marking in specific courses.

Despite saying that criteria were accessible students felt that the language used in describing criteria was unintelligible. All students across all disciplines participating in the focus groups felt this to be the case. The information was therefore of little value. Students were also asked if they knew what was expected of them and if they knew how to go about getting a first class mark. This was very subject specific with some subject groups stating that this information was widely available, clear and unambiguous whilst others felt that it was vague and unclear. It was suggested by students that those who did know what was expected did so by chance and not because they had been clearly explained. Students commented about marking criteria:
‘completely vague’

‘highly dependent on who marked it’

‘there is not really anyone who specifically tells you, you kind of pick it up as you go along bit by bit’

‘it’s vague and ambiguous; it’s a lottery’

A significant number of the sample said that whilst they knew where and when they needed to submit work they were less clear about what features/qualities were required to score highly. This in part was expressed in terms of a feeling that staff have different expectations and criteria.

It was generally felt that marking criteria were too general and needed to be tailored to specific modules. For example, a student commented that marking criteria stating what an essay should include was of little value to those completing assessment for a statistics module.

Students were not clear what was required of them to get a first class mark and commented that when they did so it was:

‘fluke – it could be your style of writing or it could be a good topic you find easy or it could be anything’

Assessment arrangements and marking
Students were also asked about their feelings about the fairness of marking and assessment. The relevant NSS statement reads: ‘Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair’. This statement was thought to be unambiguous and students thought the question related primarily to whether the marking procedures within the institution were fair across departments and faculties. Little was mentioned about fairness of assessment arrangements until students were prompted, they then
considered this to refer to timing of assessment and whether many assessment pieces were due at once rather than spread out which they regarded as ‘fairer’.

Students are generally assessed using conventional types of assessment including essays, exams, portfolios, oral presentations and so on. This is not necessarily problematic but is just an observation and despite the conventional nature of the assessment modes some subjects were using a wide range of assessment within courses, whereas some others were limited in their assessment repertoire. For example, history used a wider range of assessments than some other departments.

Almost all students said they would prefer an array of assessment methods, so whereas students expressed a preference for one particular type of assessment mode, they still indicated they wanted a range of types of assessment.

Some students criticised particular assessment modes, and it was clear that students had preferences – part of this preference was to do with the amount, or proportion of marks, awarded to a particular piece. For example, an oral presentation may be worth 10% of an overall course mark but it takes a lot of preparation and causes a lot of anxiety, whereas an essay may be worth 70% of a course mark but takes as much preparation, and there was a feeling of unfairness around this.

Students were not aware what the terms ‘summative’ and ‘formative’ mean therefore any assessment documents should either not use this language, or care should be taken that students understand this terminology.

Students indicated that some of them carried out work that was done on a formative basis whereas others were either not asked to do it at all, or asked very rarely. As such, all assessment for some students counts towards their final grade whereas others benefit from the feedback of formative assessment – the variation between the amount of formative assessment done was quite marked. Students indicated they were more likely to do formative assessment if they were then able to use it for summative assessment later in the course, and were not always clear of the benefit of formative assessment if it was not able to be used at a later date, whereas as a few saw the benefit of formative assessment in terms of their academic development.
The next statement asked students to think about whether ‘Feedback on my work has been prompt’. Very quickly in the focus group research the problem of the definition of ‘prompt’ was raised as an issue.

The students were not clear about the return of student work. Many students thought the policy was that staff had 10 days for the return of their work, but they were not sure and several had different views of what the 10 days constituted.

The focus groups also enquired as to whether students were happy with the turnaround time taken by their department. They indicated that given the amount of work they put into their assignments they wanted to make sure staff members had adequate time to mark it and to respond to their work helpfully. As such, students indicated that they were happy with the time taken particularly in the case of large subject groups or courses, but they wanted staff and departments to stick to what they said they would deliver. Most dissatisfaction came from departments failing to deliver what was promised in relation to marking deadlines, and when this did occur, failing to adequately inform students of the problem and when they were likely to receive their work.

Students indicated that essay work was often not returned promptly. Some students indicated that they completed work in the autumn but only found out the mark in the summer when the year’s marks were published. On the whole, students indicated they waited around 8 weeks for marks and feedback on essays. Generally speaking, all students felt uneasy about the lack of feedback given on exams, especially when they had had little or no feedback on essays. They felt that a conflated mark of one or two essays, an exam and possibly other forms of assessment meant students were not aware how they had performed at different modes of assessment nor how they might improve.

Students felt an adequate time for feedback was approximately 2 weeks, however they felt as long as they knew when the feedback was due to be returned a longer turnaround time would be acceptable. What students objected to was not knowing when they would receive work. Several also expressed a preference for detailed
feedback that would take longer, rather than shorter feedback that is delivered quicker.

Students felt there were peaks and troughs in assessment and that timings were not spread evenly. The majority of the students felt over-assessed although a minority felt they did not have sufficient assessment. As such there was considerable variations in student opinion but typically divided along the arts-science split, with the science students feeling they were over-assessed and the arts students feeling they were under-assessed.

Students were asked to consider the following statement: ‘Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand’. Most of the students did not agree that feedback did help them understand their studies. Respondents indicated that even when they received what might be considered ‘detailed’ feedback, and when it was useful for highlighting where they had gone wrong, it rarely gave explicit direction as to how to correct these errors in subsequent work. For example: “I often know exactly where I’ve done it wrong, but it never tells me how to do it right next time.” Students did however give some positive response to this statement, and it seems students who are proactive and seek oral advice from their tutor about their work and how they might improve it are generally more satisfied than those who do not. These proactive students indicated that a discussion about written feedback had helped them more fully understand the tutor’s comments and how they could then act upon them to improve their work. As such, some students need encouragement to seek further explanation where they feel written feedback is ambiguous or lacks more specific direction.

Overall the message on feedback was that students felt they did not get enough feedback on their work. Many students, when asked what feedback they got said ‘almost none’. Although many students received work with standard cover sheets the section for comments were very short and only ever included one or two sentences. Other students indicated they were given oral feedback in seminars. Some students also indicated they were given whole-seminar or whole-course feedback, rather than individual feedback, they felt this was generally useful but not specifically to them. The overall consensus was that students preferred face to face one to one feedback.
This has of course significant resource implications if simply taken that all students should receive one-to-one feedback, but there is perhaps a mix of feedback mechanisms that could be employed to enable students to feel they had better guidance.

Students generally felt short (one line) type of feedback was insufficient and argued that consistency between staff was needed in relation to marking and feedback. For example, on one occasion a tutor sent the same 10 words of feedback to all students on the same course via email, whereas in other courses students received several pages of feedback on their individual pieces of work. Students also thought that a mixture of positive and negative (constructive criticism) was needed in order for feedback to be effective. Students recommended tutors had extended office hours or surgeries to provide detailed individual feedback.

Students indicated they received most support in assessment preparation from personal tutors or course tutors, and few students used generic student support. Students indicated that tutors were very good at keeping in contact via email even when they weren’t available to meet face to face, and this was appreciated. Students indicated that there was a wide range of academic and personal support available but students were required to be proactive in order to access it. Students also indicated they would like subject-specific study skills rather than just generic study skills, in order to develop appropriate techniques for their field of study. There is also a lot of informal peer mentoring and support on offer but students indicated they did not think very highly of it, nor utilised it very much. There was a general perception of ‘why ask another student when you can ask a member of staff who is an expert’. A general feeling came from students that there was a lack of support available in general, and poor communication between staff and students.

Many students would like the role of the personal tutor standardised as they felt the system was rather ‘hit or miss’ as to whether they were allocated a tutor who was committed to the role, offering a good service, or one who was disinterested in supporting students and offered little or no help. Consequently some students felt disadvantaged in comparison to others. Generally speaking, students indicated they
used their peer group as their immediate support system rather than existing academic or pastoral services.

### 13.0 Issues for Sheffield to consider

#### Issues from the literature

The literature reviewed here provides an introduction to some of the contextual issues, and explores a range of innovative methods in different subject areas. There is evidence (Higgins et al, 2002) that students do take an interest in deeper learning, and have ‘intrinsic motivation’, as well as being concerned with their final summative marks. Thus moves towards giving students the opportunity to participate in the assessment process through methods such as self and peer assessment, providing they are seen as appropriate. However, it is not being argued that different assessment techniques should take the place of traditional methods, but that they should be considered to create a wider variety of assessment tools available to the faculty.

Findings suggest a certain amount of reticence among tutors in using these new and innovative methods for summative assessment. This is mainly due to concerns about validity. Academics are cognisant of the fact that they are accountable to public bodies, and to their students, whose final grade will affect them as graduates, and who therefore rely on a fair and reliable assessment system.

#### Issues raised from the focus groups and interviews with staff:

- Assessment criteria should be written in accessible language with minimal jargon. Need to communicate to students regularly, both verbally and in written format, to ensure students understand what is expected of them.
- Many problems discussed by students relate to their lack of understanding of the process of assessment therefore clear explanation of the examination process should be conveyed.
• Students prefer a range of assessment methods – there were no complaints about the generally conventional methods used at Sheffield, but they like to use a variety of them to maximise the skills they are examined on
• Students argued that assessment should be co-ordinated to prevent over assessment at certain times and periods of inactivity at others
• Some subject areas reported completing almost no assessed coursework over the time of their degrees and complained of over-reliance on unseen examinations
• Students would like clear and consistent feedback on coursework completed during the year
• Formative assessment received a mixed response from students but in general those who complete it find it a useful exercise
• Feedback should be returned within an agreed timeframe so that students are clear when they will receive it – complaints here were about not knowing when or if they would receive any feedback
• Feedback should be consistent across courses/tutors. It should be constructive providing students with guidelines on what they have done well in order that they can replicate it and guidelines on how to improve the sections they have done less well in
• Students welcomed face to face feedback from tutors and were keen for this type of feedback to become standard
• There appears to be a mismatch between students’ expectations and what staff feel they can realistically deliver. Student expectations need to be managed. It could be that more feedback could be given in the early stages with students being made aware that they have to do more themselves in the later stages
• Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is available in pockets across the institution but is not thought to be of any significant help to students and is therefore not widely used
• Students suggested that PAL would be of more benefit if it were subject and/or course specific and was provided at particular times such as revision or prior to assessment deadlines
• Many students stated that they used their peer group as their main form of academic as well as pastoral support – it could be argued that this is in fact PAL but not in the format that is currently recognised
Appendix One

Reports from individual focus groups not available via the web site.

Focus group results by discipline area

Chemical & Process Engineering - 4 students (3 male and 1 female) from Chemical & Process engineering were involved in 1 focus group.
Architecture – 9 students (6 female and 3 make) from Architecture were involved in 2 focus groups.
French/Hispanic - 9 students (2 male and 7 female) from French/Hispanic Studies were involved in 2 focus groups.
History - 6 students (2 male and 4 female) from History were involved in 2 focus groups.
Law - 9 students (6 male and 3 female) from History were involved in 2 focus groups.
Maths - 4 students (2 male and 2 female) from Maths were involved in 1 focus group.
MBB - 2 students (both female) from MBB were involved in 1 focus group.
Music - 5 students (all female) from Music were involved in 1 focus group.
Psychology - 3 students (all female) from Psychology were involved in 1 focus group.

References

Ahmed, V. Using computer aided assessment (CAA) tools for teaching and learning of construction subjects, http://cebe.cf.ac.uk/BPBN/casestudy/wolv_tla5i2.htm, accessed 19/05/06 (The University of Wolverhampton, School of Engineering and Built Environment)


Hughes & Boyle (2005) Assessment in Earth Sciences, Environmental Sciences, and Environmental Studies, GEES


Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP) project http://www.reap.ac.uk/


http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/goodpractice.aspx?ersourceid=1441

http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/goodpractice.aspx?resourceid=1434 (accessed 14/06/06)


University of Leeds Learning and Teaching Strategy, http://www.leeds.ac.uk/qmeu/committees/litstrategy.htm (accessed 22/06/06)

University of Leicester Teaching and Learning Network, http://www.le.ac.uk/teaching/tan/ (accessed 20/06/06)


Winchester School of Art  
http://www.wsa.soton.ac.uk/textpage.asp?sec=320&sub=825&pag=1 (accessed 30/06/06)


Further references

www.space.ac.uk (Staff-Student Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation). This is a project made up of a consortium of eight HEIs in the South West

www.exchange.ac.uk/issue4 This is a special issue on assessment and contains some useful contributions from authors in a variety of disciplines

http://www.bbk.ac.uk/olaaf Online Assessment and Feedback (OLAAF) Project Director is Dr Richard Rayne, School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Birkbeck College

http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/assessment2006 This website contains details of the Third Biennial Joint Northumbria/EARLI SIG Assessment Conference
http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl Centre for Excellence in Assessment for Learning. This website contains details of an initiative looking issues of assessment in Education, Childhood Studies, History, English, Psychology and Engineering

http://assessmentplus.londonmet.ac.uk Assessment Plus is a consortium-led project with initial work taking place at London Metropolitan, Liverpool Hope University College, and Aston University. This is funded through HEFCE (FDTL4)

http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk There is a very useful section on Assessment, including a number of papers written for the Assessment Enhancement Theme workshops in 2004.