Assessment, feedback and marking practices
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1. **Introduction**

Assessment and feedback is a troublesome area in the HE sector. Repeated National Student Surveys (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009) show that students are least satisfied with this aspect of their experience, researchers point out that practices are not underpinned by pedagogical theory (Rust, 2007), and staff frequently feel that they are overburdened with increasing marking loads and fewer resources.

In this context the Write Now CETL has been pursuing a substantial body of research looking at the issue mainly from the perspective of academics. This work has included:

1. **Measuring ‘newly qualified/qualifying’ lecturers’ perceptions, beliefs and approaches to assessment design.** A major survey study using the finally developed 40 item Assessment Design Inventory (ADI).

2. **Understanding the influence of organisational processes and culture on assessment design and marking practices.** An interview study with university lecturers and other stakeholders in three departments in a single institution.

3. **Staff and student perceptions of feedback quality in the context of widening participation.** A multi-methodological study involving students from 6th form schools, FE colleges, universities, as well as university lecturers, funded by the Higher Education Academy.

4. **University lecturers’ views and practices relating to assessment, marking and feedback.** A development of the work and findings begun with the ADI to investigate broader practices with established university lecturers using a questionnaire.

5. **Lecturers’ views on examinations and beliefs about their pedagogical value as a form of assessment.** An interview study across two institutions leading to an online questionnaire to investigate what lecturers believe about how examinations help students to learn.

6. **An ethnographic exploration of learning and assessment through academics’ lived experiences of learning in their own institution.** A holistic study of two groups of lecturers involved in different CPD activities (a PGCLTHE programme and a writing for publication course).

7. **The transformational potential of staff inter-departmental writing workshops: academic writing practice experience and its impact on students.** An in-depth interview study with 16 university lecturers who took part in a writing for publication workshop.

8. **A resourceful approach to effective and efficient assessment practices.** A comprehensive holistic survey of a single Faculty’s approach to assessment practice, assessment load and student learning.

9. **University lecturers’ contextualisation of learning and assessment: a social cognition perspective.** A detailed deductive analysis using social cognition theory as a guiding framework on transcripts from semi-structured interviews with 20 university lecturers.

10. **Escaping from the Tower of Babel: Researching a pedagogical understanding of assessment in Higher Education**
Since this work is not a ‘project’ in the usual sense but rather a series of inter-connected research studies with one common theme, this guide is intended to be read as an overall summary of evidence for informing practice. It will be of use to all who have an interest in assessment at higher education level. More specifically, it is intended for:

- Lecturers who are interested in changing their assessment practice at the level of the courses they run
- Heads of department and senior managers who are interested in strategic change related to assessment
- Staff developers and Post-Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE) leaders/tutors who are interested in seeing how theoretical understandings of assessment pedagogy can be implemented when participants return to their departments and disciplines
- Researchers who are interested in our methodologies and/or research tools for furthering their own assessment research.
2. Executive summary

Write Now has been a CETL with a focus on supporting student writing for assessment at university level. The work presented in this brief guide represents five years of concentrated research, some of which is still ongoing, investigating what university lecturers think about assessment and the place it plays in learning at university level. This assessment strand of the CETL has focused largely, but not exclusively, on the lecturers’ perspective of assessment as this has been seen as fundamental to the overall aim of conceptualising student writing processes and lecturers’ assessment practices as inter-related, rather than as separate processes. In other words, what we are arguing is that in order to support students with their academic writing, we need to take account of the views of those who set and mark their written work.
3. **Key themes**

These include:

- Assessment philosophy
- Assessment design
- Assessment orientations
- Assessment beliefs
- Views of PGCLTHE programmes
- Constraints to putting beliefs into practice
- Pedagogically appropriate assessment design
- Purpose of assessment
- Types of assessment
- Marking practices
- Marking issues
- Feedback practices
- Feedback issues
- Organisational issues and change management
- Lecturers as ‘students’ (including a course for their own writing practices)
- Conceptual overview of assessment.
4. Context

It is generally accepted that there is a problem with university assessment, certainly in the UK and with indications that this may well be the case in other countries too. In the USA, many institutions tend to adopt assessment approaches that are more traditional than those recommended in the literature (Peterson & Einarsen, 2001). Broadfoot and Black (2004) reviewed the first ten years of the journal Assessment in Education and reflected on the overall ‘assessment revolution’ in terms of purpose, international trends, quality concerns and assessment, and commented that:

*In very truth, we have become an ‘assessment society’ as wedded to our belief in the power of number, grades, targets and league tables to deliver quality and accountability, equality and defensibility as we are to modernism itself.*

(Broadfoot & Black, 2004, p.19)

In the UK there has been some move towards regarding assessment for learning rather than just of learning which means that assessment needs to fulfil a formative role in learning in which the role of feedback then becomes crucial. Black and William (1998) in a school practice context are credited with being the prime movers of this development, the main ideas of which have been applied in a higher education context by Black (2006). The Assessment for Learning CETL (AfL) ([http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/)) and the space devoted by the Higher Education Academy ([http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet)) shows how influential this movement has become. If we are to think seriously about assessment for learning, it follows that assessment design cannot be seen as some ‘add-on’ once a course has been formulated, but that it must be integral to the actual curriculum itself. Allied to this is the notion of focussing on learning outcomes rather than on coverage of content in curriculum design and assessing learning outcomes. Biggs (1999) has termed this process constructive alignment. Research and principles of pedagogically appropriate assessment are common in the literature (see for example, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). There are many books written about the subject and the Higher Education Academy provides guidance, suggestions and resources ([http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet)). In spite of all this conceptual understanding of assessment and the part it plays in learning, there is still a problem; students often feel over-assessed and are dissatisfied with their feedback, and lecturers feel over-loaded and tend to believe that students do not care about their feedback. Added to this is the increasing gap between the assessment context at schools and that at university. In a related NTF project called ‘Flying Start’ ([http://www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart](http://www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart)), lecturers and teachers have been carrying out a number of research projects investigating the gap between what is expected of assessed writing at A level and what is expected in the first year of a university degree. There is much to suggest that the expectations and the support that is available in both contexts is very different, so students come to university expecting to be given very specific and detailed advice on what to write as well as the opportunity to draft and redraft to improve marks. These findings confirm those of an earlier HEA-funded project that are reported later in this guide.

The picture of assessment in (higher) education is complex and confused given the various demands that are being made of it; indeed Knight (2002) claimed that assessment practices in higher education were in a state of disarray, and Rust (2007) said that much assessment practice was currently under-theorised. Given the importance of assessment and the number of books and journals devoted to the subject, it is perhaps surprising that a review of the literature shows relatively little research on the perceptions of those who are actually responsible for assessment design, marking and feedback; some notable exceptions are the work of McLellan (2001) and Carless (2006). For these reasons, it was decided that a major research strand of the Write Now CETL should be directed towards exploring lecturers’ understandings of and beliefs about assessment and learning, together with their accounts of marking and feedback.


5. Objectives

The objectives of the research studies were to provide a new understanding of the contextual issues that face lecturers in their assessment design, marking and feedback practices. Specifically, the CETL research was designed to:

a. produce two instruments that researchers could use;

b. shed some light on why assessment and feedback practices are commonly viewed negatively;

c. enable university teaching programme leaders and/or staff developers to open up debate and discussion around assessment design and values.
## 6. Summary of research studies

Below is a graphical representation of the three main areas that the research studies have addressed. Some of these studies are currently ongoing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of research project</th>
<th>Assessment design</th>
<th>Marking</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Measuring ‘newly’ qualified/qualifying university lecturers’ perceptions, beliefs and approaches to assessment design</td>
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**Project 1**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Measuring ‘newly qualified/qualifying’ university lecturers’ perceptions, beliefs and approaches to assessment design</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
<td>Bill Norton, Liverpool Hope University</td>
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</table>
| **Project team** | Lin Norton, Liverpool Hope University  
Lee Shannon, Liverpool Hope University  
Frances Phillips, Liverpool Hope University |

**Project summary**

**Rationale and purpose**

This study is part of a major research project investigating lecturers’ perceptions, beliefs and approaches to assessment, marking and feedback. This specific strand focused on newly qualified or currently qualifying lecturers and their views about assessment design. Across the sector there is relatively little in the way of training and development for assessment despite the generally accepted claim that assessment is fundamental to the learning process (Boud, 1995; Brown et al., 1997; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 2003.) University lecturers tend to assess in the way they themselves were assessed and learn through experience how to give feedback using their own preferred mental model (Norton et al, 2004). There is some evidence though, that new university lecturers are more willing to think through their values and beliefs about assessment and teaching but then may become challenged by the weight of traditional departmental cultures and feel it difficult to change assessment practice (Norton & Aiyegbayo, 2005; Norton et al, 2010).

**Research questions/objectives**

1. To explore the relationship between newly qualified or qualifying lecturers’ pedagogical beliefs about assessment design and practice
2. To develop and establish a reliable and robust measure of lecturers’ perceptions, beliefs and approaches to assessment design.

**Methodology**

Responses from relatively new/inexperienced university lecturers were elicited using the ‘Assessment Design Inventory’ (ADI). The ADI was developed from the research literature and from analysis of interview data collected earlier (84 interviews, 18 disciplines, 5 institutions). Following a pilot study (N=30) using a 68-item version, the ADI was refined to a 40-item version and made available online, via PGCLTHE course leaders in 60 Universities in the UK, to lecturers taking, or who had recently taken, PGCLTHE programmes.

**Findings**

Over 620 responses were received from lecturers, of which 586 were complete. Following factor analysis, two main latent factors, with 7 & 8 items respectively, were identified: desirable practice (meaning pedagogically sound assessment design practice) and constraints (meaning barriers that may hinder lecturers from implementing pedagogically sound assessment design practice).
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<td>Statistically significant differences in scores on these factors were found between institutions, disciplines, length of teaching experience and whether or not lecturers had recently achieved an HE qualification.</td>
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<td><strong>Implications for practice/ further research:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The ADI can be used by researchers who wish to carry out their own research in assessment design.</td>
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<td>• The current version of the ADI has been developed from the responses of relatively new/inexperienced lecturers in HE – further research on responses from more experienced lecturers to develop a version aimed at this second group would be desirable.</td>
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<td>• The ADI can be used, for example, as a tool for staff developers to gauge where their participants on PGCLTHE courses stand re their approach to assessment design and their perception of what constraints there might be on putting their approach into practice and as a stimulus for discussion and debate amongst course participants around the often problematic area of assessment.</td>
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<td><strong>References</strong></td>
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Title: Understanding the influence of organisational processes and culture on assessment design and marking practices

Author: Charles Knight, Liverpool Hope University
Lin Norton, Liverpool Hope University

Project summary:
Rationale and purpose
The study attempts to advance the understanding of how assessment and marking practices are shaped and influenced, often not by pedagogical principles, but by the need of lecturers to navigate complex organisational processes and manage subtle political relationships (Ashwin 2008, Knight 2006). Moreover, the study highlights how shifts in the overall culture of the organisation can have a significant impact on assessment and marking practices. Across the sector there is relatively little work exploring assessment practices from an organisational culture perspective, even though the sector itself and the interactions of various stakeholders has been described as having a level of complexity not found in other sectors (Kuo, 2009) and the relationships between stakeholders such as academics and managers has not been well explored in the literature (Whitchurch, 2006, 2008).

Research questions/objectives
To explore the relationship between lecturers’ actions when designing and carrying out assessment and the influences of organisational structure, processes and culture.

Methodology
Responses from university lecturers and other stakeholders involved in the assessment process across three subject specialisms in a UK university were elicited using a qualitative semi-structure interview schedule. The interviews were subject to transcription and analysis using inductive methods informed by both literature on assessment and organisational culture and politics within the Higher Education sector. An inductive analysis approach was used to identify the key issues and tensions in the use and selection of assessment methods. Code families were developed that highlighted areas of interest and concern at the course, programme and organisational levels. In addition, some inter-organisational and HE sector code families were developed and used for analysis. These arose out of interactions between academics and actors such as external examiners and also from the lecturers’ perceptive of what was deemed to be acceptable assessment practices across the Higher Education sector.

Findings
The survey found that while the majority of lecturers’ decisions on assessment design, marking practices and feedback are driven by their underlying pedagogical philosophy, other cultural and political influences were shaping their decisions. Within their host organisation, these include the need to circumvent what were sometimes perceived as cumbersome bureaucratic processes intended to ensure verification of outcomes, and the desire to conform to existing assessment and feedback activities within their
### Project 2

own departments. Moreover, lecturers were also influenced by the perceptions of ‘accepted’ practices across the Higher Education sector as indicated to them by actors such as external examiners. In parallel to the debate within the assessment literature that the more precisely defined criteria become, the more confusing they become for the students and markers alike (Sadler 2009), many relatively inexperienced lecturers found that the often very specific instructions intended for quality assurance and validation purposes left them confused on how best to develop innovative assessment, marking and feedback design.

Finally, an underlying theme across all subject areas and lecturer specialism was that the desire of the institution to place a higher emphasis on research was producing an additional workload pressure that influenced the decision of lecturers not to undertake time-consuming or complex (innovative) assessment and marking tasks.

### Implications for practice/further research:

- That feedback dominates as a method for improving student performance and more must be done to highlight other methods, such as feed forward, that can be used in conjunction with feedback. This predominance is attributable to departmental and organisational signals to academics that feedback is the ‘correct’ means to improve student performance. This indicated that more professional development must be done to increase awareness of other methods to improve student performance and understanding.

- The study also indicates that inexperienced academics will be strongly influenced by established practices within a department or subject area, and in particular by their desire to be seen to follow the practices of more established academics, in particular their line managers. In-service training that highlights the benefits of innovative and creative assessment and marking practices may offer one path to promote change and avoid stagnation.

- The selection of assessment methods is often influenced by a desire to avoid complex and time consuming organisational processes rather than because of pedagogical suitability. For example, exams are often avoided because of the need to interact with the academic registry system and complete a number of additional pro-forma. This indicates that more work needs to be done to change processes and back-office systems and balance the organisational need for accountability and transparency with the burden imposed on academic staff.

- There is an increased pressure to produce high quality research outputs and there is evidence from the study that this is leading many staff to adopt a more conservative ‘it’s not broken, so it does not need fixing’ attitude to assessment and marking practices.

### References


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<td><strong>Project 3</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
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| **Project team** | Chris Beaumont, Edgehill University  
Michelle O’Doherty, Edgehill University |
| **Project summary** | **Rationale and purpose**  
This research project was composed of three strands. The first strand explored student perceptions and experience of feedback (and university expectations) in sixth forms at schools and FE colleges in areas of the North West of England with relatively low HE representation. The second strand comprised student focus groups at three points in the year and tutor interviews to investigate the perceptions of feedback quality during the first-year university experience. The third strand consisted of negotiation with university course teams to design and implement an intervention to improve feedback quality after considering the views of students and tutors. |
| **Research questions/objectives** |  
- Investigate the impact of prior experiences of assessment on students’ expectations of feedback practices in higher education;  
- Explore tutors’ and students’ perceptions of what is considered quality feedback and how this may vary within and across disciplines;  
- Analyse any changes in students’ perceptions of quality feedback throughout their first-year higher education experience;  
- Identify barriers to providing quality feedback. |
| **Methodology** | The study made use of a number of approaches. Within the first and second strand, a range of qualitative data collection methods were used, including focus groups, interviews and a questionnaire. In the final strand, after negotiation with university course teams, an action research approach was undertaken to design and implement an intervention to improve feedback quality after considering the views of students and tutors. |
| **Findings** | The study highlighted the need for further research to establish effective and efficient means of assisting students to manage the transition from a high-dependency assessment culture of schools and colleges to a self-directed learning culture more commonly associated with university study. |
| **Implications for practice/further research:** | The research indicated that the benefits of feedback could be enhanced by a mixture of targeted interventions that would be delivered via courses of study (students) and continuous professional development (staff). Those measures would include:  
- explicitly teach self-directed learning skills to students;  
- integrate students more effectively into an agreed academic community of practice through ‘front loading’ feedback as preparatory guidance; |
• Encourage staff/student engagement with formative feedback to maximise ‘feedforward’, as viewing feedback as a single event does not enhance the student experience.

A further recommendation arises from the huge variation in formative assessment and feedback practice that we discovered among university tutors. While a number of tutors had completed PGCTLHE courses, only two identified specific guidance or training to give feedback, and that was from experience with the Open University. We strongly recommend that universities identify good practice in their local contexts and disseminate through CPD.
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<td><strong>Project team</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Project summary</strong></td>
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<th>Therefore, the project may be useful in developing a generic model that will address relevant issues related to marking and feedback and the influences on lecturers’ pedagogical approaches to assessment.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Findings</strong></td>
<td>The project is currently at the pilot stage.</td>
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### References

Project 5

Title | Lecturers’ views on examinations and beliefs about their pedagogical value as a form of assessment

Author | Bill Norton, Liverpool Hope University

Project team | Kathy Harrington, London Metropolitan University
| Lee Shannon, Liverpool Hope University
| Savita Bakhshi, London Metropolitan University
| Lin Norton, Liverpool Hope University
| James Elander, Derby University
| Peter Reddy, Aston University

Project summary

Rationale and purpose
This study is part of the major research project investigating lecturers’ perceptions, beliefs and approaches to assessment, marking and feedback. It has focussed on lecturers’ views of examinations as a form of assessment. Assessment has been widely acknowledged as having a profound influence on what students learn and how they learn. In recent years, there has been a move away from traditional learning theory to an increasing recognition that learning is a process of knowledge construction rather than knowledge reproduction (Maclellan, 2001). This has been reflected in the concomitant move towards alternative methods of teaching and learning (e.g. PBL, work based learning, experiential learning). However, there has not necessarily been so great a shift in assessment practices - in a study carried out in five disciplines at a university in the North of England, the most frequently used assessment tasks were examinations (Steward et al, 2003). Although there is much in the literature on students’ perceptions of examinations as a form of assessment, there appears to be relatively little on university teachers’ beliefs about the pedagogical value of examinations.

Research objectives
In the first phase of this study, lecturers from distinct discipline areas in two institutions were interviewed to ascertain their views on examinations. In the second phase, building on results from the first phase, an online questionnaire was used to investigate lecturers’ beliefs about how examinations help students learn.

Methodology (Phase 1)
Semi-structured interviews were carried out with lecturers at two universities in the UK. Since examinations are a ‘contested’ form of assessment, interviews were conducted around the concept of core assessment criteria (Elander et al, 2004) as a ‘device’ to more obliquely approach the main research questions:

- what forms of examination were used;
- what pedagogical value examinations were held to have;
- if there were any problems affecting assessment procedures.

Findings (Phase 1)
29 lecturers from seven disciplines participated in the study. Thematic analysis of the transcripts found that most lecturers were conscious of...
the need to align assessment to learning outcomes and used or wished to use a range of appropriate methods. There was less unanimity about the pedagogical value of examinations. There was evidence that some lecturers used examinations reluctantly as a defence against plagiarism or due to institutional bureaucracy. Most of the teachers in both institutions would abandon examinations if there were better ways of preventing plagiarism in coursework and more time/support available to develop an appropriate range of assessment methods. In addition, some lecturers wished to adapt traditional examinations by building in opportunities for formative feedback.

Methodology (Phase 2)
Participants from four UK universities were recruited via email invitation to complete an online survey. The aim was to use a larger dataset to explore further UK university lecturers’ use of traditional examinations and how this aligned with their pedagogical beliefs about assessment. The online questionnaire was based on the results from phase 1 of the study and previous literature. The questionnaire consisted of 37 questions covering the following areas: lecturers’ beliefs on how examinations help (or do not help) students learn, what lecturers look for in examinations, and lecturers’ views on examination feedback and on alternative forms of assessment.

Findings (Phase 2)
Responses were received from 105 participants. For 30% of participants, examinations accounted for more than half of their overall assessment, and 55% favoured replacing examinations at least in part with other methods of assessment. Concerns about plagiarism were the main reason for preferring examinations to other forms of assessment. Providing feedback on examinations was regarded as important for students’ future understanding by 96% of participants, while 66% currently provided feedback in the form of grades only. Together these findings suggest that factors other than pedagogical value may be determining the choice of assessment.

Implications for practice/further research

**Phase 1**
- Most lecturers did have an underlying pedagogical philosophy about assessment which was not always put into practice because of the ‘non adaptive’ discipline and/or institution. This confirms findings from a related study of new lecturers’ views about assessment (Norton et al. in press)
- This pedagogical research has produced an evidence base which could be of use in encouraging change at the discipline/institutional level.

**Phase 2**
- The findings suggest that assessment practice is determined largely by factors other than beliefs about pedagogical benefit. The implication of this is that developing new potentials for learning in the context of assessment requires attention to changing external (institutional and cultural) factors that constrain the alignment of assessment method with pedagogical beliefs.
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### Project 6

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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>An ethnographic exploration of learning and assessment through academics’ lived experience of learning in their own institution</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
<td>Daniela Mangione, Liverpool Hope University</td>
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<td><strong>Project team</strong></td>
<td>Lin Norton, Liverpool Hope University</td>
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### Project summary

**Rationale and purpose**

This empirical study focused on exploring the learning processes of new academic teachers who attended the Post-Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE) and of early career researchers who attended a writing workshop (for academic development) in a university in the North West of England. The first PGCLTHE group was assessed through formative feedback and summative assessment (non-formal and formal assessment). In the second group (writing workshop) each participant received some feedback on a written piece of work from another attendee (formative feedback) and general tips from expert academic writers.

**Research questions/objectives**

The aim was to conduct an investigation on teaching and learning in HE, with a focus on assessment. The project was developed through an ethnographic exploration in an academic institution. Ethnographic methods of data collection are as wide as possible and do not tend to follow a pre-set pattern of enquiry (Hammersley, 1990). Thus the process of research, as well as the specific aims, is flexible and evolves within the real and lived context and setting (Wolcott, 2004).

**Methodology**

The ethnographic approach undertaken aimed to ‘obtain a holistic picture of the subject of study with emphasis on portraying the everyday experiences of individuals by observing and interviewing them and relevant others’ (Creswell, 2003: 200).

Two groups’ lived experiences, of being learners and of being assessed (or judged) in their own institution have been captured through informal discussions, participant observation, field notes and face-to-face in-depth interviews.

In the PGCLTHE group, interviews were conducted with a total of 18 participants. This included four lecturers with different subject backgrounds (psychology, business, biology and criminology), twelve attendees from the current cohort and two members of staff who attended previous cohorts and agreed to narrate their experience of the course in terms of learning, achievement and application of pedagogical theories into practice, with specific reference to assessment.

In the writing workshop group, 16 attendees were interviewed a month later, in order to hear how they applied what they learned in practice in terms of actions and strategies for creating publications and for enhancing students’ learning (a kind of informal self-assessment).
The intention of reflecting on these two different training contexts was to explore the converse processes of learning to become a ‘better equipped’ academic teacher and to become a more experienced researcher who is capable of disseminating research through high quality peer reviewed material. The second goal was to strengthen the circular and dialectic research-teaching linkages to enhance students’ learning through a more empathetic approach drawn from academics’ lived experiences of learning in their own institution.

**Findings**

An analogy of the learning processes, difficulties and challenges that both staff and students face in the academia was found. Experiencing and remembering what is like to be a student and to be assessed can be a way to become more empathetic with students’ struggles and talents. However, switching between the roles of being a member of staff who teaches and assesses students and who is undertaking a learning journey is very difficult, especially due to other factors such as workload and job priorities.

**Implications for practice/further research**

The project has a range of possible implications for practice, which include:

- The assessment of peers and conversely being assessed as a student in the same institution, present two interwoven but difficult and challenging tasks. This aspect of professional development and learning must be taken into consideration, in order to promote and not obstruct learning and professional development;
- There is a necessity to continuously create learning ‘events’ to rehearse and practice the role of assessment and of academic writing (and publishing) in teaching and learning, as they are two pedagogical means of documenting and enhancing learners’ achievements, of disseminating research findings and of setting further learning goals;
- There is a need to give staff more inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary opportunities to communicate clearly and to discuss academic issues, in order to understand better the requirements and changes which are occurring in the whole university and in the HE sector.

The project also indicates areas for possible further investigation:

- There is a dearth of investigation on how to promote pedagogically, more empathy and openness towards students. This could be rectified by creating more training opportunities for sharing one’s own lived experience of learning and teaching and of discussing experienced strategies of teaching and learning with peers and students;
- Further research is needed to explore the transformational potential of the PGCLTHE programme and writing workshops for members of staff, including their impact on students’ learning.

**References**


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### Project 7

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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>The transformational potential of staff inter-departmental writing workshops: academic writing practice and its impact on students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Daniela Mangione, Liverpool Hope University</td>
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<td>Project team</td>
<td>Lin Norton, Liverpool Hope University</td>
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| Project summary | **Rationale and purpose**  
This small project explored the learning processes of a writing workshop, in which participants were given technical knowledge and tips from experienced academic writers, and, most importantly, the time to write and to receive some formative feedback from peers at different levels of their careers and from various departments.  

**Research questions/objectives**  
The aim was to conduct an investigation on academic writing, with a particular focus on writing for publication. The project was developed through an ethnographic exploration in a natural setting. Ethnographic methods of data collection are as wide as possible and do not tend to follow a pre-set pattern of enquiry (Hammersley, 1990). Thus the process of research, as well as the specific aims, is flexible and evolves within the real and lived context and setting (Wolcott, 2004).  

**Methodology**  
The ethnographic approach undertaken aimed to ‘obtain a holistic picture of the subject of study with emphasis on portraying the everyday experiences of individuals by observing and interviewing them and relevant others’ (Creswell, 2003: 200).  

**Findings**  
Data from participant observations and interviews underline the writing workshop as a time and a physical space to experience a motivating environment of professional development and a dialogue with colleagues from various subjects and at different levels of their careers. Furthermore, it presents a chance for participants to find common research interests with other members of staff and to create ideas for collaborative writing, as well as an opportunity to understand and become more aware of the impact of the changes in the HE sector on university strategy. Moreover, it gives participants the opportunity to reflect on the processes, challenged and strategies involved in writing for publications, writing for students learning and to promote students’ academic writing.  

**Implications for practice/further research**  
- The project indicates that writing workshops can be more effective if combined with providing staff with on-going mentoring support both by experts of academic writing and by subject experts, in order to discuss writing goals and ways of going beyond them. Furthermore, giving staff time and a physical space to sit and write, possibly using collegiality as a strategy to promote the ‘practice’ of writing and giving/receiving feedback, appears to be an effective strategy.
**Project 7**

- Although the positive social and interdisciplinary aspects of the workshop (which allowed participants to share experiences, worries, and challenges across the university and to generate possible collaborative and interdisciplinary projects for academic publication) were considerable, there is still a need to rethink the strategic importance of such training for staff development (avoiding, for example, time clashes or giving staff more support on how to achieve research and related targets).
- Further research is needed in order to explore the impact of such events on staff and indirectly on students’ academic writing abilities over time.

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| **Project summary** | **Rationale and purpose**
The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of academics on assessment practices, assessment load and student learning. The research was carried out within a single faculty at a university in the North of England.  

**Research questions/objectives**
To establish staff and students’ views about assessment, marking and feedback within the faculty.  

**Methodology**
To establish a comprehensive all-round view, the researcher used a qualitative hierarchical approach conducting semi-structured interviews with 18 academics ranging from lecturers to senior lecturers and module leaders through to the most senior level of management. Inductive analysis revealed a number of outcome categories that were relative to assessment practice, workload and deep learning processes. These outcomes were related to: ‘assessment innovation and change’, ‘assessment overload’, ‘working with the staff-student ratio’, ‘examples of good practice’, ‘summative versus formative assessment practices’, ‘optimal and coordinated assessment practices and data gathering’, ‘active learning frameworks’, ‘collaborative learning’, ‘critical friendship groups’, ‘tutorial’, ‘student ownership of learning’, ‘mechanisms for timely feedback’.

To elicit students’ views of their assessment and feedback experience, 172 students in the faculty completed Gibbs and Simpson’s (2003) Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ). Of these 172 students, 66 were in their first year, 52 were in their second year, 29 were final year students and 22 were at postgraduate level. (Three students did not specify year of study).  

**Findings**
Taking an overview of the outcomes, the findings from the staff interviews indicate that despite much strength with current assessment practices there was a tendency to over-assess; with a large proportion of the interviewees stating that on occasion the volume and timing of assessment is onerous on both the student and the lecturer. Given that over-assessment was considered by some interviewees to be acutely counter productive, the implication is that assessment and workload could be better addressed at the course
design stage, with a recommendation that course designers and policy makers should engage in interactive dialogue and resource model planning. Many interviewees believed that there is scope to improve coordination with the use of more flexible and innovative types of assessment and data gathering. Interviewees stated that assessment innovation is moving in the right direction by placing greater emphasis on increasing formative and continuous assessment practices as a way to reduce workload and help develop student ownership of learning. This deep learning philosophy represents a wholesale shift towards a student centred approach. However, interviewees reported that a creative approach to assessment at curriculum design stage needs to be sustained if the faculty is to continue to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of assessment practices.

The implication is that increased emphasis should be placed on meaningful assessment practices that utilise collaborative learning, with students researching complex theories and debates. An example of good practice offered by some interviewees was a learning process in which students collaborate to research a debated topic, produce a piece of individual written work and then discuss their written work in a situational ‘Hot House‘ during a manageable group seminar. This example was seen as a resourceful and effective way of assessing students’ oral as well as written articulation and understanding of theoretical issues. The outcome of this is that students take responsibility for critiquing each other’s performance in a process of critical friendship or peer assessment, whilst at the same time developing their academic and professional skills. Moreover, such situational assessment practices were reported to have a tutorial element in which lecturers are able to formatively assess and give immediate feedback as they actually see students engaging and applying their thinking.

In line with recent initiatives to reduce the assessment workload on lecturers, many interviewees identified the use of a reflective journal that includes a literature review as a way of replacing two summative assessments and reducing demanding assessment loads. Reflection was seen by many to be the most efficient form of self-assessment and to be necessary if students were to engage in deep learning processes and take personal responsibility for their academic and professional development. The implication was that self-assessment should be continuous and combined with tutorials to allow students the opportunity to receive feed-forward comments regarding the appropriateness of their reflections. As mentioned above, immediate and timely feedback was deemed to be critically important by a number of interviewees. An example of an innovative feedback system proposed by some interviewees was a feed-forward mechanism that facilitates a cascading assessment process by which students have to demonstrate during current assessment that they have taken action on previous feedback provided by their lecturers on earlier assessments. On this basis, formative assessment in the shape of tutorials was reported to generate more collaboration between
### Project 8

students and lecturers and allow quality time to discuss assessment and learning progress in detail. Findings from the student survey showed mainly positive experiences of assessment and feedback within the faculty with the first-year students reporting particularly strong support and constructive feedback. Since the AEQ did not ask about assessment workload, it was not possible to compare students’ views with those of staff. However, it was noteworthy that the students who took part in this survey did appear to be influenced by assessment in directing their study efforts and this was similar across all three levels (i.e. first year, second year and third year) for undergraduates, as well as for postgraduate students. This is entirely consonant with the current drive to consider assessment for learning rather than just of learning (Black et al, 2004; Black, 2006).

### Implications for practice/further research

To conclude, these findings may have important implications for lecturers, subject teams, course designers and policy makers.

The practical implications from this study are that resourceful approaches to assessment, marking and feedback should consider creative, dynamic and flexible assessment systems that engage both students and lecturers in a progressive and formative manner. Excellent examples of good assessment practice were proposed in the shape of group seminars and individual reflective writing journals in which students can engage with each other and with their lecturer, to demonstrate both written and oral articulation of theoretical issues relating to academic knowledge and professional practice. The implication was that group seminar and one-to-one tutorials would allow lecturers to gather strong formal evidence of academic knowledge and professional progress as students learn. This form of evidence gathering was considered resourceful and necessary to reduce unnecessary levels of summative assessment and to facilitate the coordination of assessment across different courses within the faculty. However, the overriding consensus from the interviewees was that suitable summative assessments need to be carried out at the end of each year. Given that a collaborative appraisal and formative assessment system would be in place throughout the academic year, the implications were that final summative assessment grading of student learning, progress and success would be complemented by examination grades at the end of each year. This system would facilitate shared intentionality to focus on learning behaviours and optimise the balance between formative and summative assessment, creating a balance between deep and strategic learning outcomes.

Finally, although the aforementioned implications indicate that there would be more freedom to interpret QAA guidelines with a certain degree of flexibility, it is important to note that such proposals would still be working within a framework and would need to sustain objectives in course documentation drawn up at the course design stage.

### References

### Project 8

**Assessment for Learning – Putting it into practice.** Open University Press.


Assessment, feedback and marking practices

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<td><strong>Project summary</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Rationale and purpose</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Findings</strong></td>
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| **Implications for practice/further research** | Two important practical implications emerged from this study:  
• The practical implication for assessment is a greater emphasis on collaborative appraisal practices in the shape of tutorial systems, in which engagement between tutors and students would allow the exchange of emotions and proximity between tutor and student and optimise the balance between formative and summative assessment;  
• Engaging students with active learning frameworks such as problem-
### Project 9

based learning and experimental research led projects was seen as ideal for nurturing self-directive learning opportunities, increasing intellectual arousal for challenge and collaboration among students themselves, and between students and lecturers.

The practical implications are that active learning frameworks should engage students in open-ended interactive learning on the threshold of understanding and allow students to enhance self-efficacy and competence through experience and practice. This autonomy supportive environment was seen as crucial if students were to develop a sense of control in their learning and self-regulate their assessment grades. Finally, the most important implication for this study is that the operational functioning of SCT provided a strong and robust framework for understanding lecturers’ pedagogical beliefs and perceptions in higher education, with regard to learning behaviours, personal characteristics and the effect of the environment as an intermeshed process with conceptual practical implications for practitioners, staff-developers and subject teams working in higher education.

### References


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<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
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</table>
| **Project team** | Jodie Butler (Research assistant, Masters’ student at Liverpool Hope University)  
Lin Norton, Liverpool Hope University |
| **Project summary** | **Rationale and purpose**  
This project aimed to strengthen the link between research on assessment and the practice of assessment in teaching and learning in higher education. |
|  | **Research questions/objectives**  
The objective of the project was to develop a visual map framing assessment from various perspectives, which have been drawn from reflecting on theories and practices on assessment. |
|  | **Methodology**  
Voices of academics have been heard through informal discussions and interviews. 34 in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted and their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment have been captured. A masters degree student, involved as a research assistant, provided her own experience of HE and assessment, combined with those of her peers, through self-reflexive notes and informal discussions, with the lead researcher. |
|  | **Findings**  
A visual map derived from lecturers’ perspectives, the masters’ degree student’s account and emerging issues in HE has been created. The project is still on going, at its final stage. |
<p>| <strong>Implications for practice/further research</strong> | The visual map produced aims to provide insights on assessment from various actors involved in teaching and learning: the student, the lecturer and the learning society |</p>
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7. Summary of findings and implications for practice

Each of the studies (research projects) reported in this guide has presented a summary of findings and some implications for practice (although in some studies, research and analysis is still ongoing), so it is not our intention to repeat them here. However, it is worth reflecting that the overall picture from these studies is telling us that assessment, marking and feedback is a complex and fluid process which is almost impossible to capture and contain in one single description or a model. The nearest that we have been able to come to such a model is to use Fanghanel’s (2007) framework for describing the influences that affect lecturers’ pedagogical constructs. The framework operates at three levels of academic practice:

1. The macro level (influences include the institution and external factors)
2. The meso level (influences include the discipline and the department)
3. The micro level (influences include internal dispositions and experiences of the individual).

This, together with Biggs’ (2004) proposition that learning takes place in a system where changing one component inevitably affects all the other components in the whole system, are more fully described in Norton (2009). Both the work of Fanghanel and Biggs have relevance here, as we do not want to suggest ‘best assessment, marking and feedback practices’, since we would argue that to do so is to ignore the context and ‘tinker around the edges.’ To engender change means taking a holistic, systemic approach, but pragmatically this is not often possible for those who are most directly connected with assessment: the lecturers and the students. We present, therefore, some cautious and tentative recommendations for our different stakeholders in section 8.
8. Conclusions and recommendations

Since assessment, marking and feedback is still a relatively under-researched area when examining the views of lecturers, it would not be appropriate to offer any specific recommendations, for the same reasons as outlined in section 7. However, on the basis of our findings so far, we do feel it might be helpful to offer some general guidelines on implementing change as follows:

- **For lecturers**
  Being aware of the influence of the department that you work in as well as the epistemology, practices and mores of your discipline may help when attempting to introduce new or different methods of assessment, or when changing marking and feedback practices. Sometimes, it is only possible to exert change at the level of the course or programme for which you have direct responsibility, but taking a collaborative approach and ‘getting colleagues on board’ can begin to make assessment change happen, as can presenting evidence of any change initiatives. Such evidence may need to be presented at departmental meetings and as high in the institution committee structure as you can get. It is also worth remembering that the student voice is part of the evidence base and can be a powerful trigger for change.

- **For managers**
  Changing assessment has to take account of the strategic imperatives of the institution which may or may not favour a holistic approach. If widespread change in assessment is perceived as necessary (due, for example, to student dissatisfaction or poor student engagement), this may mean conducting either an institutional audit or, as a minimum, audits at faculty and/or departmental level. Some degree of externality is helpful, perhaps by going beyond external examiners’ views and seeking the advice of ‘experts’ in the assessment field. Any proposed recommendations might work more effectively if considered in terms of Fanghanel’s (2007) three levels of academic practice and Bandura’s (1986) social cognition theory.

- **For staff developers**
  Our research has indicated that relatively new or inexperienced lecturers face specific ‘barriers’ when seeking to change assessment practices. University teaching programmes often act as triggers to get them thinking about assessment in a profoundly different way and may also enthuse them to try out what they have learned on course in the context of their own practice. Discussion of learning as a system and the influences on them as individual academics, particularly with reference to social cognition theory, may help buffer them against sometimes disappointing reactions to their initiatives. More experienced lecturers may not always be aware of the latest research on assessment and feedback, so continuing CPD, particularly that which is inter-departmental and interdisciplinary, is important but may not be taken up unless there is some institutional recognition or reward for doing so.

- **For students**
  Since assessment is such a fundamental and important part of your degree course, it pays to understand as much as you can about the context of your degree, what it means to learn at university level and how the assessment system works in your subject. Students who tend to do well in university are not just those who work hard, but are those who also have an understanding of the whole learning process, the part that assessment plays in that process as well as a heightened awareness of themselves as learners. Knowing that the assessment and support you will find at university will be very different to the experiences you have had beforehand, may help you make the transition in academic writing that is needed for degree level work. It is not at all unusual to feel adrift and worried about the standard of your work when you do not have the opportunity to receive the same sort of structured support and feedback that you have been used to. Becoming an independent learner able eventually to judge the value of your own work takes
time and you will find that levels of support and guidance are concentrated in your first year, gradually lessening as you grow in experience and confidence. To help you in the early days, the Write Now CETL team has produced a guide to writing essays at university (Norton et al, 2009) which you might find useful. If your university does not have hard copies of this book, an electronic version can be found at http://www.writenow.ac.uk/assessmentplus/documents/WritingEssaysAtUni-11.pdf (accessed 2 August, 2010)

• For researchers
Researching lecturers’ views, perceptions, beliefs and practices relating to assessment, marking and feedback continues to be an under-researched area. There is a need particularly for more multi-methodological studies which seek to explore this area from different perspectives within a systemic approach. Action research studies for practitioner researchers can be particularly effective if academics are seeking to influence change at the level of the course or programme for which they have responsibility, or if they seek to change disciplinary traditions.

References


9. Literature review

Journals


Book chapters


Encyclopedia entry

Conference papers


Invited research seminar presentations/conference papers:


Norton, L (2010) ‘New lecturers’ views of assessment: Can they put into practice what they learn on a university teaching programme?’ Invitation to contribute to three day workshop on the impact of training for teachers in higher education funded by the European Science Foundation in Bratislava, Slovak Republic, 18-20 March. The Exploratory Workshops scheme is one of the key instruments of the ESF science strategy pillar to encourage explorations of an emerging and/or innovative field of research.


10. Further resources

Further information on Write Now projects is available at: www.writenow.ac.uk

For information on the HEA funded research project on feedback carried out by Liverpool Hope/Write Now staff: visit http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/Beaumont_Final_Report.pdf
11. People

Savita Bakhshi  Write Now CETL Research Fellow  London Metropolitan University  
http://www.writenow.ac.uk/about-us/contact-us/savita/

Chris Beaumont  Formerly Deputy Director of Write Now CETL  Liverpool Hope University, now at Edgehill University  
http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/tld/FellowPro/ChrisBeaumont.htm

James Elander  Write Now CETL evaluator and co-researcher  Derby University  
http://psychology.derby.ac.uk/staff/James_Elander.html

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