

# **Assessment Careers: Project Baseline Report Institute of Education**

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**JISC Assessment and Feedback Strand A Project**

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## Executive Summary

The project will develop and test an Assessment Career framework to enhance formative assessment at the Institute of Education. This baseline report has the following aims:

- To review current practice at the IOE in assessment concerning feedback practice and assessment design for learning.
- To identify and conceptualise good practice in formative assessment and technology enhanced assessment across the sector.
- To compare the IOE practices with the conceptualised good practice to generate solutions and plans for improvement in formative assessment.

It uses a form of soft systems methodology combined with theory driven evaluation to address these aims.

Key findings:

### 1. IOE strategies and policies

There is evidence of a recent shift in IOE policy on assessment away from a predominant concern with the technicalities of assessment towards assessment for learning. QA documents in particular lag behind strategic documents. This project builds on existing data gathered at the IOE in research on assessment and aligns with a strategic Assessment Working Group which will report to the Teaching Committee in summer 2012. It also aligns with a strategic Curriculum Review and a related Open Mode strategy to streamline the IOE programme portfolio and increase online provision.

### 2. The match between IOE policy and practice

The quality and timing of feedback can be variable. There is also variability in the number of drafts a student can submit and how long these can be. Essays are used extensively, but there is evidence of variety of assessment design including oral presentations and multi-stage assignments. There are different interpretations of agreed assessment criteria and standards and a range of feedback pro-formas are used.

### 3. IOE infrastructure support for assessment

There is a VLE which can be used for giving feedback and for assignment submission and marking. The extent of use of the VLE for this purpose is not clear, but email is used extensively for feedback.

### 4. Student views of formative assessment

The IOE has high satisfaction ratings, but feedback is an area that receives lower satisfaction than lecture quality. Students find feedback on drafts helpful, but this can sometimes raise expectations of grades. Feed forward for future assignments is also appreciated. Feedback is not always challenging for the strong students and can be too critical and de-motivating for less confident students. Timely feedback is welcomed and delays cause a problem for some students. Small-scale innovative practices such as use of ipsative feedback, peer feedback and replacing grades by pass/fail were all welcomed by students.

#### 5. Frontline staff (teachers and administrators) views on assessment

Programme leaders demonstrated a range of assessment practice. Lecturers' views on formative feedback vary from those who recognise a link between feedback and progress over time to those who view feedback as justification of a grade. Most claim to provide detailed developmental feedback for students but may not always be providing what students value. Some staff prefer the traditional essay while others use a range of assessment methods. The view of programme administrators is unknown at present.

#### 6. Senior staff views on problems in current assessment practice

Senior staff members are aware of the inconsistencies in assessment practice, keen to overcome such inconsistencies and are already taking measures to ensure improvement. External Examiners reports also indicate variation in the quality of feedback.

#### 7. Sector theory and practice

The literature on assessment clarifies that feedback must be useable and understood by students and it provides some useful guidelines for good practice that are informed by theories of assessment for learning. Projects using technology to enhance assessment build on sector good practice to address deficiencies in assessment practice. Technology is especially helpful for improving learner engagement with feedback. However, projects tend to be small scale and require investment.

#### 8. Developing solutions

A rich picture of IOE formative assessment practice in relationship to sector practice suggests that the Institute mirrors the sector in that good practice is not uniformly applied and innovation is not scaled up. The IOE is ready for change and could make more of opportunities to use assessment to promote learning which might have both pedagogic and efficiency benefits. Possible examples include: disaggregating feedback and grades, multi-stage assessments, a feedback 'CV' that learners take with them through a programmes and greater use of feed forward.

A model of how feedback produces learning through e.g. grading and dialogue was also developed. A proposed set of assessment career principles could help embed a longitudinal developmental approach to feedback into programmes and support students in both learning from past experience and looking to the future.

The next steps are to use the model that theorises the relationship between feedback and learning as a basis for the 5 pilots and to develop and test the Assessment Career framework.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background to project and the IOE

The *Assessment Careers* project aims to address two challenges faced by the Institute of Education (IOE) concerning assessment that have been identified by Senior Management and through institutional research. Firstly, there is a challenge of integrating assessment into the learning process (assessment for learning). Assessment for learning means that feedback is useable and motivational for students and that there is scope for creativity and risk taking in assessment design (within the limitations of requirements of statutory bodies where applicable). The second challenge is ensuring that feedback and marking practices are efficient.

The project aims to transform assessment at the IOE over 3 years by developing and implementing an Assessment Career framework which is supported by our VLE and which takes a longitudinal view of assessment.

## 1.2. Aims of the baseline report

The first aim of this report is to review current practice at the IOE in assessment concerning feedback practice and assessment design for learning.

The second aim is to identify and conceptualise good practice in formative assessment and technology enhanced assessment across the sector.

The third aim is to compare the IOE practices with the conceptualised good practice to generate solutions and plans for improvement in formative assessment.

This report will be used to develop assessment career principles, to prepare for the piloting of new formative assessment practice and as a baseline for identifying institutional transformations arising out of the development and testing of the Assessment Career framework in years 2 and 3 of the project.

This report will **not** consider marking and examination processes and the reliability and validity of standards and awards.

Key questions that the report will answer are:

1. What do IOE strategies and policies say about assessment and feedback?
2. How is formative assessment and feedback conducted at the IOE?
3. How does reality match the formal processes?
4. How does the IOE infrastructure support assessment e.g. use of technology?
5. What are student views of formative assessment?
6. What are frontline staff including teachers and administrators views on assessment?
7. What do senior staff perceive to be problems in current assessment practice?
8. How do the IOE assessment practices compare with sector innovation and good practice in assessment and feedback?

## 2. Baseline Report Methodology: Using Soft Systems Thinking

Soft systems thinking is an approach developed by Checkland (1999) as a methodology for analysing complex systems which do not generate data which can be readily captured, and for which solutions for problems in the system are not immediately obvious.

An institution such as the IOE is in a constant state of flux and data captured in any one period may not be stable over time. Samples taken in one year also may have limited representation. Indeed gaining reliable and meaningful data is a key challenge for any university in a sector which has been under financial pressures for the past decade or more and is currently undergoing particularly rapid change arising from new government policy on funding. Although designed for business, systems thinking could be usefully applied to a HE institution's assessment regime to provide a structure and methodology for the Baseline Report.

Using and adapting the systems thinking approach, the Baseline Report will be divided into 4 sections which draw on the stages in the systems thinking methodology.

- Building a rich picture of the system (i.e. the case study of IOE practices of formative assessment and feedback to include both general practice and innovative practice)
- Describing use of technology to support good practice in assessment across the sector
- Conceptualising the case study and comparing IOE with the real world
- Generating solutions by developing and piloting the Assessment Career framework

### 2.1. Building a rich picture of the IOE system

The first step is to describe the full complexity of the situation i.e. different points of view and how these overlap and present conflicts.

Sources produced both quantitative and qualitative data and included:

- Assessment and feedback documents including how assessment is reviewed and monitored
- Data from IOE research projects and surveys on methods of assessment and feedback widely used plus examples of innovative practice
- Student views of assessment especially types of feedback received and effectiveness of feedback
- Frontline staff views – including non-specialists and specialists - on current assessment processes and practices
- Senior management and External Examiner views on current assessment processes and practices
- Review of technology to support assessment, including accessibility and inclusion

A rich picture of IOE practice and stakeholder views was constructed by comparing data from different sources and identifying the strong themes and challenges that emerge. A template was used to gather and categorise the data (see appendix 1).

## 2.2. Details of IOE data sources

The project reports and official documents that have been examined for the IOE review are as follows apart from the strategic and policy documents which are dealt with in section 3.1. A brief summary of each document, together with how the data is coded is given:

### 2.2.1. The report of the Facilitating Transitions to Masters-Level Learning project (Scott et al. 2011)

The project investigated IOE students' transitions from undergraduate study or employment to Masters-level work, and developed and promoted policy and resource arrangements derived from the investigation to improve formative assessment and feedback processes in higher education institutions. Four transitions were investigated using journals, focus groups and interviews over a year:

*Pure to Applied Discipline:* this transition refers to students who, having taken a first degree in a non-applied subject such as physics or philosophy, then undertook a higher degree with an applied orientation. The sample was a group of full-time home PGCE students (n=15) with degrees from a range of pure disciplines undertaking applied education studies courses in preparation for a teaching career [Transitions PA, FT PGCE].

*International Context to UK National Context:* this refers to an international student's expectations about learning, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The sample consisted of full-time international students studying on the MA or MSc programme who had not had residence in the UK before (n=15) [Transitions Int, FT MA/MSc].

*Work Intensification:* this transition focuses on the addition of part-time study responsibilities to full-time work. The sample was a group of part-time home students (n=15) who were full-time UK teachers or education professionals [Transitions WI, PT MA/MSc].

*Non-academic and Non-standard Background to Academic Setting:* this transition refers particularly to current policy issues relating to Widening Participation agendas. A group of students (n=15) from non-standard backgrounds either full- or part-time across the range of courses on a Masters programme was recruited [no data was relevant to this report].

Four intervention projects were set up using the findings and one was undertaken at IOE in the second year of the project. The intervention was to provide learners with ipsative feedback that acknowledged progress irrespective of achievement. Ipsative feedback was provided as part of formal feedback on assignments and as informal tutor feedback during student online discussion activity in a virtual learning environment (VLE). The module selected for the intervention was part of two programmes: a Certificate in Teaching in Learning in Higher and Professional Education and an MA in Clinical Education. All students on the module were working

professionals. A small number of consultative interviews were arranged with invited groups of students [Transitions Site-based PT MA].

### **2.2.2. The report of the Ipsative Assessment and Motivation of Distance Learners project (Hughes et al., 2010)**

This study explored the potential of ipsative assessment to motivate distance learners through reviewing literature and through a small-scale investigation. The programme investigated was an *MA in Applied Educational Leadership and Management* delivered wholly online to a fixed cohort of part-time, international students. The project focused on the tutors' feedback for the assignments of the two core modules and 11 students (out of a total of 35) and 3 key tutors were interviewed. [Int. PT MA 2010].

### **2.2.3. The report of the Implementing Ipsative Assessment project (Hughes et al., 2011)**

The study built on the above investigation (Hughes et al. 2010). A new Assignment Submission Form and a new data base of current students' assignment mark sheets were located on a VLE accessible to tutors. Three sets of data were collected: the use of the form and the feedback received by students, email interviews with student volunteers studying the core module and optional modules and e-mail interviews with the tutors of these programmes. The total sample was 28 part-time international students. [Int. PT MA 2011].

### **2.2.4. The report of the Scoping a Vision for Formative e-Assessment project**

This project (Pachler et al. 2009) was for software developers to integrate formative e-assessment with existing e-learning technologies and other post-16 practitioners using formative e-assessment in order to support them in making more effective use of formative assessment.

### **2.2.5. I-graduate Survey (2010 & 2011)**

All students attending the IOE were invited to complete the i-graduate survey in 2010 and in 2011. Statistical data on satisfaction ratings for assessment and for teaching and learning were compared.

Relevant quotes were extracted from the 'Learning' and 'Recommendation' comments from the 2010 survey, and the 'Learning', 'Support' and 'Recommendation' comments from the 2011 survey. The faculty that the quoted student belong to is added where possible [i-graduate 2010, FPS], [i-graduate 2011, FCL].

### **2.2.6. Issues Raised in External Examiners' Reports 2009/2010**

At the beginning of the 2009/10 academic year a revised procedure for handling External Examiners' reports was introduced. In addition to Faculty and programme team scrutiny and response, there is a new IOE-wide procedure which ensures an objective overview of the External Examiner reports, through a small Scrutiny Panel, and copies being provided to the Pro-Director: Learning and international and Faculty representatives.

A summary report is still produced but the revised version does not include all comments from External Examiners. Themes are identified and the more common issues listed. The report is considered by both Teaching Committee and Senate, with Teaching Committee taking responsibility for overseeing appropriate action.

Themes were identified from this report and the more common issues were extracted.

### **2.2.7. Report on Pass/Fail Grading (2010)**

In autumn 2009 the pathways – PGCE/Dip Post Compulsory (Generic), PGCE Post Compulsory (ESOL/Literacy), Dip in Education: Mathematics (Numeracy) – implemented a new system of grading assignments on a pass/fail basis rather than awarding grades A-D for all new trainees beginning their study at the IoE. The Post Compulsory team proposed in this report to continue with the Pass/Fail from 2010 onwards.

### **2.2.8. Survey of Programme Leaders (2012)**

The Assessment Working group sent 55 questionnaires to programme leaders asking about assessment and feedback practices in their teams and received 40 responses. Some of the data gathered were used in this report.

## **2.3. Describing good practice and in particular use of technology to support assessment across the sector**

The second stage began with a review of good practice across the sector in use of technology to enhance and support feedback and assessment for learning.

Sources included previous JISC and Higher Education Academy projects on assessment and feedback as well as research that reviews assessment practice and literature that provides good practice guidelines and definitions. A template was used to summarise and analyse the projects (see appendix 2).

We also considered the environment (what surrounds and influences the system beyond the immediate vicinity) e.g. QAA and assessment regulations.

The review was used to begin to conceptualise sector practice to produce a “world view” of the system (how the area is perceived from a particular view). In this case this was the view of best practice in the sector drawing on key theoretical literature on assessment and definitions of feedback and assessment for learning.

## **2.4. Conceptualising the case study**

### **2.4.1. The rich picture**

In a final stage a rich picture of IOE formative feedback practice in the context of sector practice was summarised using the metaphor of a map (see appendix 1). This picture was used to identify areas where we did not have data and areas where data sets were patchy. It also helped us to identify any links between stakeholder perspectives.

The rich picture of IOE practice was used to benchmark IOE practice against the sector practice by comparing the rich picture with sector good practice and innovation.

### **2.4.2. Developing the programme logic for assessment enhancement**

Theory-driven evaluation provides a way of analysing organisational change initiatives (Chen & Rossi, 1983; Donaldson, 2005). The approach involves eliciting models that describe the process through which inputs are expected to generate outputs, then looking for evidence that can be used either to develop the model or substantiate the claims being made.

## **2.5. Generating solutions**

Finally, the rich picture and the theory-driven evaluation were used to suggest ways of solving problems by making suggestions for what the different people involved need to do to ensure that the system functions more effectively to promote learning. This leads to developing the Assessment Career framework and the design of pilot studies.

# **3. Building the IOE rich picture**

This section begins with a discourse analysis of relevant IOE formal documentation which is followed by a description of actual practice. Stakeholder views on this practice are then presented.

## **3.1. A discourse analytic review of institutional strategies and policies on assessment**

This element of the baseline report has been undertaken to document and analyse the institution's formal position on assessment and feedback, as expressed in the strategy and policy documents that guide practice. For this review, 10 documents were identified as relevant to questions about assessment and feedback practice: two version of the institutional learning and teaching strategy, a selection of the institution's validation documents and guidance, plus one proposal relating to this, and a document that is currently being drafted that offers guidance to staff on assessment practice. Institutional advice to students, in the form of the cross-programme Student Handbook, was also included. Each of these will be considered in turn.

### **3.1.1. Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2007-10**

The Institute's previous Learning and Teaching Strategy consisted of a vision statement, an assessment of context, and a plan to achieve the vision. There were also links to other related strategy documents.

This document contained 10 references to assessment and two to feedback – however, these latter were about student feedback on teaching, not feedback to students.

Assessment was described in terms of “methods and associated assessment criteria”. This suggests a technical, procedural orientation to assessment.

Assessment was talked about as an area in which the Institute “needs to develop more flexible approaches”, in particular in relation to “the potential offered by digital technologies” and “innovative assessment frameworks for learning located in the workplace”. This implies that current practice was, at least to some extent, narrow or inflexible and missing opportunities.

Two groups were identified as being in a position to help develop new approaches: the Learning Technologies Unit and the Centre for Work-Based Learning (now disbanded, following the end of HEFCE funding).

Staff members are positioned as needing “continuing staff development [...] in relation to innovative modes of teaching and assessment”. This implies a model in which staff are in deficit, and innovative assessment practice originates outside of existing practice. Similar implications can be drawn about the need to “embed equality” in learning, teaching and assessment, although this is related to the Institute as a whole rather than staff *per se*.

However, this position does not typify the document. By contrast, specific projects were identified as having “facilitated considerable progress” in raising awareness of sharing good practice; elsewhere it is noted that “innovative practice [...] exists in a number of Schools”, which should be shared more widely. The reason for not sharing to date is attributed to “the lack of structures enabling such activity” rather than the failings of staff.

### **3.1.2. Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2011 Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2011-14**

The IOE launched a new Learning and Teaching Strategy this academic year<sup>1</sup>. This made two references to assessment and two of feedback, although of the latter, only one was related to learning and assessment.

The first reflects the concerns of the previous strategy to broaden assessment practice, positioning “a wider range of assessment options” as a way “to extend opportunity to professionals who have never engaged with higher education”. The second also echoes the previous strategy with a commitment “to encourage innovation and variety”. Importantly, both of the two reasons offered for this concern improving students’ experiences: by benefitting from “the wealth of knowledge and experience in this field at the IOE” and through “further developing the feedback we give students to assure a sound foundation for improvement”.

This orientation to learner experience, rather than technique, represents a development from the previous strategy. While there is still some sense of problem or deficit, the strategy adopts a more consistent view that improvements can be developed and shared ‘in here’ rather than needing to come from ‘out there’, beyond the institution.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/documents/About\\_Policies/Learning\\_and\\_teaching\\_strategy\\_2011-14.pdf](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/documents/About_Policies/Learning_and_teaching_strategy_2011-14.pdf)

### 3.1.3. Quality documentation

A series of documents related to institutional Quality processes were reviewed. Chronologically, these were developed in the years between the first and second Strategy documents reviewed above. They include:

- The Module Proposal Form (2009)
- The Programme Proposal Form (2009)
- The Annual Programme Review (2010-2011 Initial Teacher Education version)
- Annual Programme Review and Development Report (2010-2011 Professional Development Programmes)
- Periodic Programme Review: Purposes and Procedure (PPRPP) (2011)

The module proposal form only refers to assessment in one section. Here, assessment is framed in terms of methods, and information is requested about the relationship between specific methods and learning outcomes. There is no mention of feedback in relation to learning.

The programme proposal form makes one reference to assessment and none to feedback. The one reference is to “assessment strategies” (rather than methods, suggesting a broader, less technical orientation) and how these “incorporate the learning outcomes” (consistent with a more instrumental, less strategic orientation to assessment).

In the Initial Teacher Education annual programme review, assessment is mentioned 11 times. All mentions of feedback concerned reviews of the programme rather than feedback on learning. Within this document, assessment is described as a ‘mode’, positioning it more generally than a “method” but perhaps not quite as a ‘strategy’. Information is requested about patterns of deferral and later about “unintended bias”, reflecting concerns over equity. Assessment is positioned as a topic that External Examiners, the programme team and students may comment on, and about which issues could arise during Exam Boards; everybody involved in learning and teaching except administrators are positioned as having a stake in assessment practice. There is an expectation that such issues will lead to discussions in Institute committees and plans for action to remedy the current situation. Specific consideration is made in relation to the guidance and moderation of assessment within school placements, suggesting the need for caution about variations in practice within and outside the Institute.

The professional development programme annual review is consistent with the initial teacher education version, using the same form of words in many sections, but without the direct focus on assessment in other contexts. There is therefore nothing further to add, as the discussion of assessment here mirrors that above.

The PPRPP document referred to assessment 11 times, but some of these concerned the programme team’s self-assessment of their practices. Only two mentions were made of feedback, both concerning students’ experiences of the programme rather than feedback on learning. In relation to learning, the document explicitly included assessment within the scope of periodic programme review, focusing on its effectiveness and the use made of technology. Assessment was

framed both as a set of methods but also, more generally, as a kind of strategy. Judgements of assessment are directed to consider “current appropriateness and likely value in the immediate future” (again suggesting a strategic orientation), mode of delivery, fulfilling learning objectives, equity of participation, relationship to ‘key skills’, progression and completion and “assessment grade profiles” (suggesting an orientation to the ongoing development of assessment-related aspects of students’ identities). Where the review identified issues, recommendations could be made about changes to assessment.

#### **3.1.4. Report on pass/fail assessment grading**

The report on pass/fail assessment grading (2010, for specific programmes) is not a formal Institute quality document, but is an attempt to vary existing Quality-related procedures. While the term ‘assessment’ only occurs in the opening title, ‘feedback’ features 11 times and is closely linked to learning. In this sense, the document provides an interesting contrast to ways of talking about assessment and feedback found in the formally established documentation.

Strong contrasts are drawn between feedback and grading, suggesting that “in-depth” written and oral feedback helps learners to ‘master’ skills whereas grades encourage instrumental surface or strategic learning; research is mentioned but not cited to support this. Feedback is described as being incremental and formative, building links between assignments, being able to reflect the qualities of the work not just grading criteria, making better use of staff time (more for feedback, less for grade reconciliation), forming a basis for dialogue and conceptual change, and as being experienced positively by students. The idea of ‘quality’ feedback being ‘meaningful’ recurs throughout the document, suggesting a practical or phenomenological orientation to assessment practice.

Taken as a whole, this discussion of feedback has a strong developmental orientation, focused on the development of students’ identities as learners rather than on method or credentialing. While this is not a formal Institute policy, it is an interesting indication of the qualities of discussion around assessment and feedback within the institution more generally.

#### **3.1.5. Assessment guidance for staff**

The final document in this review was drafted during the starting period of the project. It provides guidance on assessment for staff, but its formal status and its stated purpose - to “harmonize the information and provide additional guidance, support and direction in respect of all aspects of assessment” - suggest that it has a policy function, whether or not it is formally classed as an institutional policy. Within these documents, terms such as ‘assessment’ and ‘feedback’ are used extensively and so will not be itemised as in previous sections; instead, this analysis considers the sections in which these terms are used. (It therefore does not include sections on topics such as marking or moderation that do not directly address assessment and feedback *per se*.)

Assessment is described in terms of principles (consistency, transparency, equity), which include the principle of using feedback to facilitate effective learning.

Institutional structures – such as Teaching Committee – are identified as having responsibility for assuring adherence to the principles. It is subject to regulations, which are linked but not elaborated. Formal and informal assessment are differentiated. Diversity in assessment is encouraged as a response to student diversity, to ensure equity, which is seen both as the basis for “carefully designed” links between learning outcomes and evidence of learning, but also being “compliant with anti-discrimination legislation”.

Assessment is also described in terms of functions, including measuring achievement, driving learning and promoting academic and professional qualities. This provides a strong orientation towards considerations of learner identity and development. (In this respect, provision of entitlement to resubmission following a failed submission can also be understood as a developmental opportunity.) It is also described as something that can be transcribed (at the end of a programme), to create a formal record of students’ studies and achievements; in this sense it has an important credentialing role in relation to students’ academic identity.

Assessment is also described as informing lecturers about areas of the curriculum that need revision because learners consistently have difficulties, positioning it as a developmental opportunity for staff.

The measurement of learning is related to learning outcomes that “define what the participant is able to do by the end of the module”. The credibility of evidence of learning in relation to these is described as being a focus for the QAA review. Grade related criteria are referred to, but localised marking schemes are also permitted if these are available to students and used consistently. The award of a grade is positioned as something that needs justification, and which raises questions of standards, equity, consistency and moderation; external examiners have a role in assuring this, but so too does the entire exam board, particularly in cases where modules are offered “through more than one mode of delivery or in different locations”.

Assessment is described in terms of practices, rather than methods; these practices are listed in terms of the artefacts that they generate or involve (e.g. portfolio, essay, examinations, *etc*). Diversity in assessment practice is encouraged, subject to scrutiny by the Validation Sub-committee in terms of “rigour, academic relevance and practicality”.

Not all student assessment practices are acceptable: students are encouraged “to behave with honesty and integrity”, which implies that some do not. Specific attention is directed towards referencing and reproduction, which is positioned as a moral matter, and the foundation for the role of educational institutions in society. The guidance document notes that conventions about what counts as academic misconduct are local, and may not be shared by students with different cultural backgrounds (understood geographically). The onus is placed on tutors to ensure that students understand what constitutes plagiarism in this context, which is defined in related documentation. The Turnitin service is discussed in relation to misuse of sources (including collaboration with other students), but this is clearly positioned as “a tool to help provide better information and feedback to your students about the

work they have submitted” (i.e. it is given a developmental role), while responsibility for decisions about the appropriateness of citation or reuse of sources remains with the tutor. Both students and tutors are able to use the system, although if tutors wish to do so, students must be made aware of this through the programme handbook.

Feedback is described as helping learners evaluate their ability, appreciate their current progress and plan development, and encourage self-reflection; it is asserted that it should be provided consistently, support positive elements of work, is a student entitlement and can be the basis for dialogue. These descriptions combine concerns about equity with claims about learning and development (for which research evidence is mentioned but not directly cited). Students are described as usually being more motivated by information on progress than “excessive” critique. Expectations around formative feedback are specified in terms of quantity (once per formal assessment) and timeframe. Existing good practice is recognised, but as with other policy documents, it is asserted that there is “in places a lack of consistency”, implying a need for developmental or remedial action.

### **3.1.6. Student Handbook 2011/12**

In addition to the policies and guidance for staff, the information given to students about assessment and feedback was also reviewed. The student handbook contained 73 references to assessment, and 10 references to feedback. However, several of the references to assessment were duplicates, repeating material for each level of award.

Assessment was positioned as an entitlement specified in the Students’ Charter, albeit one that would be withdrawn from students if they fail to meet attendance requirements; have not paid their fees; or if their registration is not in order. This entitlement is as follows:

#### **Assessment**

You are entitled to:

- a) clear and specific information in your Programme Handbook about assessment requirements relating to the different modules which form the programme
- b) clear information about the dates of written examinations and dates for submission of coursework, which should be published well in advance
- c) submit one outline or full draft of each piece of coursework on which you should receive clear and constructive written comments within three weeks, provided that you have met the deadlines for submission of drafts set by the programme team. Programme handbook will specify whether you may submit an outline or a full draft.
- d) the opportunity, where appropriate, to undertake an early written assignment which is not necessarily part of the formal assessment, in order to get a feel for writing assignments and to obtain feedback on this from your tutors
- e) where possible, be given a provisional grade for your assessed work, which will be recommended to the relevant board of examiners
- f) copies of written summative feedback in relation to your assessed work.

To summarise, this entitles students to clear procedural information and information about outcomes, as well as one or more opportunities for “clear and constructive” comments about the form and content of coursework.

Technically, assessment was linked to credit value, and for a Masters level award has to include either a report or dissertation. Assessment is described as involving various methods (possibly different for each assessed element of the course), with timing and format specified by the course team. Formal results (grades) follow from assessment, being dispatched by registry after Exam Boards.

Assessment involves reference to criteria. For Masters level awards, and for Postgraduate Diplomas and Certificates, these incorporate “key skills” including scholarly skills, critical analysis, methodological and research skills, and communication. For Graduate Diplomas or Certificates, and for Bachelor of Education (Honours) and of Arts (Honours), the specifications of the grade-related criteria are different (e.g. referring to “highly proficient” rather than “outstanding” assessment practice). These criteria are markedly different from those used for the Foundation Degree. It is noted that these criteria may be supplemented by additional information specific to each programme of study.

Plagiarism is identified as one kind of assessment ‘offence’ or ‘irregularity’ – something that is taken seriously and will be reported to Institute authorities for investigation. A plagiarism detection service “is used by academic staff as a tool to help them provide better information and feedback to their students about the work they have submitted”; this is intended to help maintain standards and ensure assessment fairness. Responsibility for decisions about whether something constitutes plagiarism remains with the member of staff.

Assessment was described in terms of who could provide advice about assessment (programme leaders or personal tutors), including clarifying the criteria used to assess work; who was responsible for entry to assessment (the student); which areas of the institution had responsibility for administering assessment (Registry Management Information Systems and Records); support relating to specific learning difficulties, and assessing such needs (Disability Co-ordinator); taking action in relation to suspected assessment irregularity (Academic Registrar); and where further information could be found (programme handbooks).

Feedback was described as a tutor’s responsibility, and “where appropriate” students are entitled to an opportunity to undertake an early written assignment that is not formally assessed in order to get feedback. (There may be multiple opportunities for this during reports or dissertations.) This is distinct from summative feedback, which will be provided for assessed work and from feedback on drafts or outlines of assignments. Feedback may be prompted by use of the plagiarism detection service.

There were also references to feedback provided by the students as part of programme evaluation.

### **3.1.7. Summary of assessment documentation analysis**

The documents reviewed here show the complexity of ways of thinking about assessment and feedback as represented in institutional policy. This has developed across the period reviewed, but includes several consistent messages.

Discussion of assessment has moved from an early technical focus to a broader orientation that treats assessment as a strategic issue. Assessment has consistently been recognised as serving several ends (developmental, judgmental and credentialing), with greater emphasis being placed on the formative aspects of this over time.

This is not reflected in the documentation for students, however, which remains focused on procedural and technical concerns, specifying rights and responsibilities. This includes recognition of the formative value of feedback, but only in a small minority of references. There is almost no reference to strategic or developmental considerations.

Throughout the documents, there is an emphasis on improving assessment practice. Some of the initial discussions of improvement adopted a remedial position; in later documents, the position is that good practice exists, but should be shared more widely. There is a stronger emphasis on learning from staff within the institution, rather than on external expertise.

There is also a consistent drive towards diversifying assessment practice. This is justified in relation to student diversity (including compliance with legislation) and support for learning. Concerns remain about issues of equity (seen as everyone's concern) and quality.

The broadest and most formative orientations towards assessment can be seen in the later documents, which are not yet part of formal institutional policy. In these, the formative and developmental aspects of assessment are prominent, and attention is given to assessment's role in learning and the development of students' identities. This provides a supportive basis for the current project, which focuses on these aspects of assessment.

## **3.2. How does reported practice match the formal processes?**

Evidence from staff and students suggests that the technical requirements for assessment in formal documents are interpreted inconsistently in the following ways.

### **3.2.1. Variation in practice on submission of drafts**

All students on all modules are entitled to submit a draft or outline piece of work for formative assessment and this was consistent with practice.

An 2010 survey of 14 programme leaders from the Faculty of Policy and Society (FPS) was also consistent with the student accounts of variation in practice.

It suggested that:

- Formative feedback is normally mandatory practice (13/14 replies)
- It generally includes both written and verbal elements (10/14 replies)

However, variation in the length of drafts required for formative assessment was evident.

.. that draft was anything from a few hundred words up to the full essay, if you want. I tended to do a couple of thousand words, and have the structure and the outline.  
(Transitions PT MA/MSc)

Huge disparity...the approach to it to start with was one of very positive feedback, bending over backwards to be helpful; whereas the previous module .... the first thing that was said was I will not be able to look at more than a thousand words.(Transitions PT MA/MSc)

Students mostly described feedback on a single draft or outline, but there was one example of variation on this.

..you always get like three tries at your essay, so you put in a first draft, or an essay plan, and then you got some feedback....., and then you submitted a second draft, with more feedback, and a final draft.(Transitions PT MA/MSc)

The 2012 programme leader survey also indicated that the definition of what constitutes submitting a draft for formative assessment varies. The following definitions were being used:

- An outline
- A longer draft in prose but not a complete draft
- A complete draft assignment
- I accept whatever the student produces

Lack of clarity in the formal documents could be a reason for the variation described above.

### **3.2.2. Essays as the main form of assessment**

Nearly all students described the summative assessment as 'essays' so it seems that this is the dominant form of assessment although they may be using the term as a general term for a written assignment which might include e.g. learning journals and portfolios. However, there was reported evidence from teaching staff of more variety in assessment practice in keeping with the aspirations of some formal documents. The survey of programme leaders identified that essays were the most commonly used method of assessment by over three quarters of respondents followed by a much smaller usage of reports, oral presentations, fieldwork, reflective journals, portfolios or logs and work-based assessments. One programme leader summed up what seems to be the prevailing view:

I actually think an essay is about as good as you are going to get if you are going to do a formal sort of fairly standardised assessment. An essay gives you quite a lot of scope to express yourself appropriately.

Use of a single end-of-module assignment was also typical, but one programme used multi-stage assessment described by the programme leader as:

three parts that are interrelated: a) a substantial piece of mathematical work in geometry (equivalent to 1000 words) b) personal reflections on doing the mathematical work, its relation to teaching and learning, and questions to research or investigate coming from these reflections (1500 words) c) a synthesis of research, culture, philosophy etc that are used to answer the questions arising from the mathematical work (2500 words).

There was little evidence of linking of assessments across modules although another programme leader showed awareness of the benefits of taking a longitudinal approach:

.. we read assignments across the programme so developing understanding of progression challenges in a very diverse programme.

### **3.2.3. Transparency of assessment criteria and standards**

There is some indication from students that the published assessment criteria and standards are not transparent:

..the information on what assessments entail is sometimes hard to decipher or even find/be told" (I-graduate 2010, FCL)

### **3.2.4. Timing of Feedback**

In terms of feedback timing, practice at IOE is diverse. Some say they receive feedback shortly after submission:

We receive feedback from written assignments almost immediately after handing in work, and the feedback is both thought-provoking and encouraging." (I-graduate 2010, FCL)

However, a number of students indicated a long delay in getting feedback:

Due to exam boards it means that you do not receive your feedback and grade for your first assignment until half-way through the third term. (Transitions PT MA)

## **3.3. How does the IOE infrastructure support assessment e.g. use of technology?**

### **3.3.1. The VLE**

The IOE's technical infrastructure relies primarily on the use of email, shared servers and a Virtual Learning Environment to support assessment. Assignments are commonly submitted by email, stored on shared drives that make them accessible to markers, marked manually or using editing applications such as Word, and then written feedback provided (again, in Word) and emailed back to students. An increasing number of modules are moving towards VLE submissions, that are downloaded by markers themselves, who return their feedback via uploaded Word files, again through the VLE. The programme leader survey indicated that about half of programmes have at least one online submission. Any combination of elements of both methods is in use at the IOE. Where there is discussion of feedback, this is commonly provided face to face; where technology is used, it often involved email, or

less frequently synchronous discussion through Elluminate. Submissions are sometimes checked via Turnitin to identify possible academic misconduct. The prevalence of all these practices is unknown.

Courses typically use standard Word forms for providing feedback to students. Aside from this, however, no technologies are used as templates for assessment or feedback practices.

There is some recognition that technology could be useful to support innovations such as ipsative feedback. Currently, for tutors, access to previous formative feedback and assessment is not always easy and may be time-consuming. A study concluded that if ipsative assessment is to be part of the current tutoring and double marking arrangements, some innovative means to access evidence of learner progress is required perhaps using the VLE to ensure efficiency (Hughes, 2011).

The use of technology to facilitate ipsative feedback could include:

- 1) submitting assignments, drafts and feedback electronically and storing in one easy to access place such as a VLE;
- 2) recording feedback in the VLE as a standard practice rather than as an additional duty for tutors;
- 3) creating electronic menus for selecting tutors' feedback comments and peer feedback.

### **3.3.2. Feedback pro-formas**

The Programme leader survey indicated that templates or pro-formas are widely used for providing summative feedback. A sample of summative assessment pro-formas were reviewed from all levels at the IOE H level, M level and EdD (doctoral level).

Although different in style and format each pro-forma had sections for the marker to fill in feedback under general headings. These closely match the IOE agreed M level grade criteria which cover 3 key areas:

- Grasp of the field of study
- Understanding and evaluating research and methodologies
- Structure and communication

Some also include a section for "Overall Comments".

The doctoral feedback form was different offering many more sections and addressing areas that are particularly important at doctoral level such as the appropriateness of the research questions.

Some programmes such as the Primary PGCE also had a pro-forma for formative assessment, but this does not appear to be common practice.

### **3.4. What are student views of formative assessment?**

#### **3.4.1. Overview**

In the igraduate survey, students' overall satisfaction is high in both the 2010 and the 2011 statistical data. In 2010, 965 students in total completed the survey. Out of 768 respondents who answered this question, 87 percent answered they were satisfied with 'Overall learning experience', and in 2011, the figure was 82.2 percent out of 819 respondents. But this is a very general view which does not tell us much.

The learning experience was then broken down into the following areas: Quality of lectures (2011 only), Expert lecturers, Good teachers, Course content, Course organisation (2011 only), Research activity, Learning support, Marking criteria (2011 only), Assessment, Topic selection (2011 only), Multicultural (2010 only), Managing research (2011 only), Learning spaces, Laboratories (2011 only), Library (separated into Physical and Online in 2011), Technology, Flexibility (2010 only), VLE (2011 only), Employability, Careers advice, Work experience, Language support, Academics' English, Performance feedback and Opportunities to teach.

One of the more significant findings is that students' satisfaction with the expertise of teachers and quality of lectures tends to be higher than learning support and feedback practice. In 2010, 95.2 percent out of 742 respondents said they were satisfied with 'Expert lecturers', and 89.0 percent out of 731 respondents were satisfied with 'Good teachers'. However, satisfaction for 'Learning support' was 81.1 percent (726 respondents), and for 'Performance feedback' was 81.9 percent (692 respondents). The gap seems to have slightly widened in 2011. 85.7 percent (663 respondents) showed satisfaction with 'Quality lectures' and 93.5 percent (782 respondents) to 'Expert lecturers'; whereas, 81.8 percent (763 respondents) was satisfied with 'Learning support' and only 76.6 percent satisfied with 'Performance feedback' (744 respondents). This means nearly a quarter of students (23.4%) are dissatisfied with feedback and this is of concern. Learning support could cover a range of areas from tutorial support to library and IT support, so is difficult to pinpoint the problem area, but there does seem to be an issue with feedback.

This data masks a variation in student experience of assessment and dissatisfaction might be limited to particular programmes. Students are aware of variation in marking practice:

..different teachers based on their own preferences based on what they picked up over the years, they look at different things, so at that point I started taking things with a little pinch of salt and not taking it too personally. I realise that ... you have to find a way that works for you... (Transitions PA, FT PGCE)

The student interview data was collected from 9 MA programmes and a PGCE programme in 2010 and was combined with survey data from students on all programmes to give a richer picture. There are themes that emerged from analysis of the data on feedback and the relationship between feedback and grades which

provide insight into what helps student learning and which also support a shifting institutional response towards assessment for learning. There was no discernable difference in views from part-time and full-time students or between international and home students.

#### **3.4.2. Feedback on draft work as helpful**

Written or verbal feedback on drafts was strongly appreciated for reassurance and because it was often helpful.

I just want him to see the outline to make sure that I haven't either gone off, a) completely at a tangent, or b) it's not just completely lame. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

..it's helped me, I think, to be more structured with the essays. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

My subject mentors were both really good, really helpful (Transitions FT PGCE)

Those who did not receive feedback through tutorials felt they were missing out, for example:

..we were told we are going to have a tutorial later on, but then they say there was no chance. In the end we had no tutorials to improve our essays. So that's a bit hard, because if people don't give you advice, or criticise what you have done, you don't have a lot of chances to improve it yourself. (Transitions Int, FT MA/MSc)

#### **3.4.3. Raising expectations**

Students' perception of investing time and effort into acting on helpful feedback could raise expectations of grades and if this did not occur students were disappointed:

I was slightly disappointed not to improve my score on Module 2 as I worked extremely hard to try and take the Module 1 feedback into account." (Int. PT MA 2010)

Everything you tell me I should do, I thought I had done them, at least they were in my mind when doing the assignment. I find the mark given very low, and demotivating, considering the huge amount of time and work put into it." (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

#### **3.4.4. Feedback too challenging or not challenging enough**

Some students were critical of tokenistic positive feedback or unhelpful feedback.

Whilst trying to rewrite my draft...I realised the feedback I was initially pleased with was not very useful as it only highlighted one very minor area for improvement. As this was my first Masters level essay I very much doubt that there was only one error." (Transitions MA/MSc)

For those who achieved high grades, feedback for further improvement was not necessarily offered, and this can frustrate those students:

I got an A-which I was really happy with. Unfortunately yet again the feedback was incredibly positive but with no hints on how to improve. I raised this issue.... In reply the tutors said that they wanted to encourage us and therefore wanted to give us positive feedback. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

A more moderate achiever felt the same.

The reply I got from my essay was extremely positive and I just felt that there wasn't any comment that helped me to challenge myself and go further what I had already written. Isn't their job to force me to be better?" (Transitions Int, FT MA/MSc)

Others did get challenging feedback which they appreciated:

Having someone tell you [the harsh realities of what it would be like], for me it was reassuring...you would perhaps think that maybe, actually, that would be the kind of thing that would be off-putting, but actually, having it all laid out as 'This is how it's going to be' was really great for me." (Transitions FT PGCE)

But critical feedback can be de-motivating as well:

..that was a presentation where I think we all got harsh feedback, [tutor Y] said we'd just flopped over the line. I don't think he'll say that again about our presentations, because we were all totally demotivated. Because we'd all done the best we could at the time, we were all new, doing it for the first time." (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

The variation in response could depend on how well the feedback was phrased and/or how receptive the students are to criticism.

### **3.4.5. Feed forward for other assignments**

There is some evidence of a long-term approach to feedback at the IOE. Many students valued generic feedback that they could apply to other assignments (feed forward).

My feedback was it had two parts that I read, one was the specific feedback on that piece of work and then the other was there was some general, well, I read them as general pointers for subsequent work, so that was very helpful. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

Examples to illustrate feed forward were also helpful.

I found [one of the tutors'] feedback most useful, [the tutor] explained through examples and encouraged me to do better." (Int. PT MA)

But others were focussed on the current assignment rather than thinking longer-term and did not like being given new comments at the summative stage, for example:

..in my final assessment she was criticising lots of things, and I felt it was really unfair, because she hadn't said anything during my initial draft. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

### **3.4.6. Timing of feedback**

Early deadlines were helpful for some but others wanted flexibility over when to submit drafts.

I think actually making people do that (submit work early) does actually help.  
(Transitions PT MA/MSc)

It would have helped if the deadline had been later or is there a more flexible way of doing this without a deadline. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

Others were less concerned about submitting drafts or deadlines because of workloads:

I do a very busy ... job, so I haven't been able to submit essays very often before the deadline. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

There were also mixed views on whether a delay in getting feedback or feed forward on final assignments caused problems. This depended on whether students thought that there was overlap between module assignments.

I would imagine that feedback is to be used so it would be for the next assignment. So the timing of it might be for some people that that's too late to get that feedback to start it. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

Due to exam boards it means that you do not receive your feedback and grade for your first assignment until half-way through the third term. This has been ok for me because the second assignment takes on a different approach from a different perspective ...As a consequence I didn't feel I needed to see the feedback and grade from the first assignment in order to inform writing the next. (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

The lack of continuity in the curriculum implied by the latter student may mean that feedback delay is not a problem, but in a more coherent curriculum feedback would need to be timely.

Sometimes very quick verbal feedback was appreciated:

I benefitted far less from written things whereas a quick informal discussion at the end...maybe a five minute chat, where the teacher said 'these are the things I would like you to improve on' was valuable. I enjoyed that because I felt that it was less formalised and I wasn't being scrutinised, so I think I responded well to that."  
(Transitions PA PGCE)

### **3.4.7. Ipsative feedback (feedback on progress)**

Students were sometimes very uncertain about making progress in the longer term as they relied on grades for this.

I only have one grade on which to base my ability and nothing on which to demonstrate progress." (Transitions PT MA/MSc)

In an attempt to give students clear feedback on progress, an ipsative feedback scheme was developed with distance learning tutors introduced an ipsative feedback form for students to complete (Hughes et al. 2011). The ipsative feedback form:

- allowed students to reflect on how and to what extent they have responded to tutors' comments in the formative feedback;
- facilitated a systematic approach to keep track of changes made which enabled self-assessment;
- provided both students and tutors with a space for better communication;
- significantly increased the amount of ipsative feedback given to learners

The analysis of the forms, students' experiences and subsequent tutor comments suggested that for students, ipsative feedback is motivational and builds confidence.

It is always constructive to know whether one's work has improved or not. It's very motivating and encouraging." (Int. PT MA 2010)

### **3.4.8. Peer feedback**

There was not much evidence of use of peer feedback, but it was mostly viewed positively, particularly if it was monitored by the tutor.

..feedback that was extremely helpful was the feedback where we had to submit for peer review an idea for our final assignment, and then both peers reviewed it, and then (tutor's name) reviewed what both the peers and yourself, myself, had written.(Transitions PT MA/MSc)

However, some students did not find peer feedback useful and students may need to be convinced of its value.

I would rather just get the tutor feedback (Transitions PT MA/MSc).

### **3.4.9. The relationship between grades and feedback**

The comments above suggest that grades motivate or de-motivate students, but there were also some suggestions that a pass/fail grade system would be sufficient, particularly for the more professional programmes.

you don't really care what grade you get at the end of it, because actually you've done the best that you can, it doesn't actually matter because it's such a vocational (course)...and like it's really helping me in loads of other ways, it's not like being at school anymore, where it all matters about the grade. (Transitions WI, PT MA/MSc)

Trainees on the PGCE and Diploma courses which applied grading only by Pass/Fail argued that grades A-D which produce categories of distinction or merit are less important than the quality of feedback from tutors, for example:

I have found the current PASS/FAIL grading combined with a detailed 1st and 2nd marker feedback to be an excellent process for delivering constructive comment to a trainee teaching professional.... Gaining a MERIT or even a DISTINCTION for PGCE

essay work does not assist in the process of self development as a teaching professional.

### **3.4.10. Use of technology for feedback**

Students did not raise issues about e-assessment, possibly because it is not widely used. The exception is email feedback which is helpful for busy students.

...[feedback is] mainly via email, but also using like the track changes on Word, if it's done through Word, which I do find quite useful, because sometimes you don't always have the time to sort of speak on the phone, or meet in person, because obviously busy time schedules and work schedules don't always allow that..(Transitions PT MA/MSc)

This project will link with a JISC funded project Digital Literacies as a Postgraduate Attribute<sup>2</sup> to identify any digital literacy implications for use of technology for feedback.

## **3.5. What are frontline staff including teachers and administrators views on assessment?**

### **3.5.1. Teaching Staff views of assessment at the IOE**

Interviews with 8 IOE programme leaders conducted as part of the *Transitions* research combined with data from 4 tutors on the distance learning programme that piloted ipsative assessment suggest that there is no uniform approach, method or attitude to assessment processes. For example one programme leader stated:

The findings of the survey of our staff in the Faculty was that the predominant model was the feedback on a draft on an outline draft and on a written good draft so that was seen as the best medium for getting as many of them through as possible. That is not absolutely all programme leaders, there is one programme leader who thinks that you shouldn't have any feedback at all.

Another programme leader felt strongly that comment and feedback on a completed assignment are often simply a justification for a grade, because there is little point in feeding forward when there is no link to the next module, rather than being intended as helpful to a student for improving their own learning.

Those comments I think they are more about justifying the grade because some people don't go on to do another module or it is a long time until they do...

The criteria for awarding grades are often unclear, not only to students but to assessors, allowing different markers to award very different grades; one interviewee talks of a piece of work being graded a distinction by one marker and a fail by the other although more often there was a single grade difference:

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<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/developingdigitalliteracies/DigLitPGAttribute.aspx>

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So although we have got the criteria [the first marker] thought that ethics wasn't flagged up enough and they were very hot on ethics basically, and I gave it an A because it was different and there was an understanding of the readings in it that I hadn't come across in any other students. So I thought this person was a bit brilliant. But then we got a third marker who gave it a B and said that it was quite brilliant in some ways but it didn't have this, this and this, but it was still a good dissertation.

It is not surprising then that students are sometimes unclear about assessment criteria. One lecturer described peer assessment to overcome this:

..they write this essay which in itself is a reflection and then they bring five copies to the session, they then sit in groups of four or three and then the others in the group read each other's and then the person who wrote it has to say how well they think they have met the criteria. And the criteria were designed by the group two weeks before...

Other tutors were weary of student's dependency:

I have students who become really dependent on my feedback...Some students don't have the confidence to take my feedback and do things for themselves.... I don't know why some students behave in that manner.

Student high expectations also arose as an issue in the programme leader survey. Tutors are aware about raising student expectations of the grade they might achieve and about formative assessment being time-consuming:

...feedback at the draft stage can be 'too encouraging' and it has led to some unrealistic expectations

Expectations of support are often disproportionate to the amount of time that can realistically be given (e.g. in terms of F2F meetings with students, draft lengths and type and quantity of feedback).

Feedback on drafts must be very comprehensive otherwise students can complain that any issues raised in relation to the final submission should have been raised earlier. This is very time consuming.

Programme leaders mostly claimed that they also provided developmental comments with summative feedback although this may be more an aspiration than a reality:

Ideally, there are also comments that target how to attain the next grade.

The students mostly felt that they did not receive sufficient useful feedback so this suggests that there is a mismatch in student and staff perceptions of the level of feedback provided.

The programme leader survey also indicated that weaker students were in some cases given extra tutorials or referred to the programme leader while in other cases

they were referred to the Academic Writing Centre. They did not mention any targeted means of supporting weaker students through formative feedback.

The programme leaders also provided examples of stronger students being stretched that again contrast with the student perspective:

Detailed formative feedback is provided for stronger students for example to help them work towards a distinction or publication in relevant cases.

Students who are strong are encouraged to consider developing towards doctoral research.

Few essays are perfect - we try and note what improvements could be made whilst praising successful aspects of the work.

Lecturers' understanding of the purpose of feedback varies in the same way that feedback practice varies. There is some unexplained inconsistency between student and staff perspectives on feedback.

### **3.5.2. Innovation in assessment**

There was some evidence of embracing of innovative practice by staff. For example, ipsative assessment was welcomed by distance learning tutors as it would "enrich the learner's experience". However, several potential difficulties were identified in the scoping study.

Firstly, "tutors 'swop [sic]' students and may not appreciate their learning history within the programme overall". At the same time, "the transfer of relevant information about the student across different tutors would be v. [very] burdensome". This leads to an issue of tutors' workload and the programme leader was concerned that resources were not available for any additional tutor time.

The programme leader agreed that putting the emphasis on to learners to record their progress perhaps on assignment submission forms might be a solution and the implementation of this idea was well received in the second ipsative assessment study.

The tutors indicated a readiness to further explore the use of ipsative feedback, however, one tutor also warned, that any innovation must be sustainable and efficient.

Providing systematic cumulative feedback is a desirable objective, but the system we adopt should be efficient as well as effective and not place unsustainable burdens on students of (or) tutors.

There was a belief that students' expectations of the assessment process needed to be managed as these expectations could range from the 'reasonable to the unreasonable' with students immediately seeking solutions to raising their grades. This was consistent with the students' own expectations discussed earlier.

I could see from the comments that some students expected their revised draft to lead to an A, and it was subsequently disappointing for these students to gain a sense of progress without an A.

The piloting of pass/fail grading was also well received by staff with a recognition that this method allowed tutors more freedom and time to provide useful feedback.

Tutors have commented on the 'intellectual freedom' to write to the assignment, as opposed to writing to grading criteria. Responses have been overwhelmingly positive. Comments made relating to the opportunity to: 1) offer incremental feedback which tracks and develops trainees' work; 2) make comments that reflect the level of achievement within an assignment, as opposed to reflecting the constraints of grade criteria, e.g. recognise and praise achievement and use words such as 'excellent' when marking an assignment that may be problematic in other respects, without fear that this might be misread by trainee to mean 'grade A work' when compared with grading criteria; 3) focus on what really matters within an assignment, rather than be driven to comment against and/or justify grade descriptions (Pass/Fail Grading Report).

A few IOE staff took part in Scoping a Vision for Formative e-Assessment (FeA) project funded by JISC which was undertaken between June 2008 and January 2009<sup>3</sup>. The project report produced was intended for software developers to looking to integrate FeA with existing e-learning technologies and other post-16 practitioners using FeA, in order to support them in making more effective use of formative assessment. The report presented 10 design patterns which were developed through a participatory process of the project. IOE staff contributed to five of those patterns. The following two are examples of IOE staff expertise in use of technology for assessment:

- creating space within the learning environment where learners' works can be displayed side by side, with the use of mobile devices with camera function and social networking tools.
- improving formative feedback by embedding a mechanism in the learning and teaching system that regularly captures tutor feedback, analyses it, and presents them with graphical representation of the types of feedback they have given.

While there is evidence of such pockets of high levels of expertise in use of technology for assessment, the digital literacies of other staff will not match this. There is a programme of staff development underway for the transfer from Blackboard to Moodle which will provide staff who take this up with an opportunity to develop both basic and more advanced skills in using a VLE.

Other examples of small scale innovation practice identified by programme leaders included: use of peer formative feedback, use of pre and post seminar tests as well as use of student presentations as mentioned above.

### **3.5.3. Programme Administrative Staff views of assessment at the IOE**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/reports/2009/feasstfinalreport.aspx>

This was identified as an area where views are largely unknown. Administrative staff are increasingly expected to manage more than one programme, but the number of modules reduced in 2011/2012 as a result of the internal curriculum review. It is not clear how assessment administration workloads have changed, if at all.

### **3.6. What do the senior and external staff perceive to be problems in current assessment practice?**

#### **3.6.1. Inconsistency of Feedback practice**

The Pro-Director: Learning and International has set up an Assessment Working Group to meet in 2011-2012 to review assessment practice at the IOE. This has arisen in response to concerns from the Teaching Committee that feedback practice is not consistent across the institution. The concern is that this leaves us open to student complaints over lack of equity. Academic essays are assumed to be the main form of assessment which does not accord with sector good practice.

#### **3.6.2. Changes in marking regulations**

The Pro-Director: Learning and International has noted that one External Examiner expressed concern over the change made for marking regulations in 2010/11 which means that the second marker no longer provides a full set of comments. This is something to be monitored.

#### **3.6.3. External Examiner Comments**

Much of the content of the External Examiner reports concerns either marking process or is very programme specific and thus the comments are not relevant for this project. Problems specific to one programme will be taken up with that programme leader. However, in the summary report, general concerns from External Examiners concerning feedback for each level of studies were identified from similar comments appearing on at least 2 reports. These are as follows.

##### *Initial Teacher Education*

- Concern whether students are engaging well with feedback
- Feedback not provided for all (teaching) observations
- Students should be encouraged to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses/provide their own personal context/experience

##### *Professional Development (includes MA programmes)*

- Lack of feedback for stronger students in how to improve/develop further
- Weaker students should be encouraged to engage more critically
- No comments (provided) within the text of the assignment.
- Students should be encouraged to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses/provide their own personal context/experience
- Different approach and standard of marking with regard to assignments of different cohorts

*Doctoral School includes EdD programmes*

- Provision of feedback under specific headings to be considered
- Request that formative feedback provided to students at draft stage be included with final scripts
- Lack of systematic checks for plagiarism

There are several comments here that have already been identified by other stakeholders including variation in application of marking criteria and standards, quality of feedback, and a need for differential feedback for stronger and weaker students.

### **3.7. Summary of IOE formative assessment practice**

The findings suggest that the Senior Manager view of inconsistent practice in applying assessment policy is correct. This applies to both the processes of formative assessment –submission of drafts-and to the effectiveness of feedback.

Equity is a recurrent feature of the formal IOE documents and the findings indicate that there are concerns about equity in the processes of assessment and marking in relation to both student entitlement and the appropriateness of feedback for students from different backgrounds and levels of achievement. There is a distinction here between entitlement as a common baseline for all and equal treatment of students in, for example, providing the same level of critical feedback to all because while the former is likely to receive wide support, the latter is not perceived as fair by learners at either ends of the learning spectrum.

Programme leaders are aware of these issues and some have been involved in innovative practice seeking to address some of the problems. However, from the student perspective, feedback in particular is not adequate in many programmes for both PT and FT students and for international and home students. This mixed picture on formative assessment is consistent with the IOE documentation that positions the institution as being in transition from an operationally focussed assessment regime to a more learning and developmentally orientated regime. One programme leader captured the need for change, especially as a response to a changing student body:

Some IOE assessment practices feel quite archaic and appear to be based on a very traditional model of university education (i.e. input up front led by the module tutor followed by self-directed study by the student). This model assumes that our students are well-versed in these practices and can cope with this model - increasingly this is not the case, particularly on programmes with large numbers of non-traditional students and international students. I'd like us to move to a system where more assessment is done during the module.

The above data was gathered mostly before a change in the double marking regulations so that students now receive feedback from the first marker only. The impact that this has had on feedback effectiveness is not yet known - it could mean

the marker has more time to provide useful feedback, or that learners lose the benefit of two points of view, or a combination of both.

## 4. Assessment practice across the sector

### 4.1. Definitions of feedback

It is widely agreed that there are two main purposes for assessment: firstly, a measurement or grading and, secondly, a contribution to the learning process. The latter is captured in the phrase 'assessment for learning' which is discussed more fully in section 4.2. Feedback is essential to assessment for learning and has been defined as:

“ ..information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance” (Hattie & Timperley 2007:81)

Although such a definition is widely recognised, there are several areas of potential confusion and disagreement on what counts as effective feedback and there are different types of feedback in common use. These points are explored below as part of a fuller definition of feedback.

#### 1. Distinguishing formative and summative feedback is not helpful

Formative assessment refers to providing developmental feedback without grading while summative assessment is the process of grading work. It is not the assessment tasks that are formative or summative, but the way in which the assessment is done but even this is not clear-cut. Summative assessment might consist of a grading and a commentary which explains the judgement. However, this information could also be used formatively for a subsequent assessment. A distinction between formative and summative feedback is not therefore useful since any feedback can potentially be used to inform learning.

#### 2. Effective feedback is not given to learners, it is only effective feedback if the learner can interpret and act upon it

Feedback is often described as something given to learners with an uncritical assumption that feedback is also received. Wiliam, (2011) argues that we cannot describe verbal or written information which is not understood as feedback, and viewing feedback as given to students to correct or highlight errors aligns with a narrow transmissive view of learning. Meanwhile, a constructivist pedagogy where learners make their own meanings is consistent with a definition of feedback as something the learner engages with and acts upon (Askew & Lodge 2000; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

#### 3. Feedback is not always looking back-it can look forward as well

Sadler's (1989) view of feedback as that which closed a gap between actual performance and the required performance is widely accepted. Learners must be aware of the standards expected and the assessment criteria but these are not always transparent. The idea of helping learners appreciate and then overcome this gap encourages a view of feedback as developmental –sometimes termed feed forward.

Hattie & Timperley (2007) have more recently developed a model of effective feedback which distinguishes:

- Feed Up which enables learners to answer questions about goals;
- Feed Back which enables learners to answer questions about where they are now;
- Feed Forward which enables learners to answer questions about where they need to go next.

They give evidence that feed forward is most useful for learners (see 4.2.1).

#### **4. Self-feedback and peer feedback can be as important as teacher feedback**

Carless et al. (2011) and Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have argued that in higher education assessment must be sustainable in that it must help learners to monitor themselves, give self-feedback and become less reliant on teachers. However, self-assessment develops over time and much formal assessment is not transparently linked to future assessments and evidence for learner progress is difficult for learners to gather because grades are the main indicator of success (Hughes, 2011).

Peer feedback is also recommended by researchers and theorists (Handley et al. 2008; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Black & Wiliam 2009). However, peer feedback needs to be well managed and a systematic literature review by Evans (2011) suggests that the outcomes of peer feedback are very mixed.

#### **5. Feedback can be intended and formalised or unintended and informal**

Learners engage with feedback continuously in their learning: from peers, tutors and from self (Black & Wiliam 2009). Even in a lecture a student may ask a question and the answer could enable feedback on learner understanding. However, feedback may be intended or formally provided when linked to formally summative and formatively assessed activities. Such deliberate feedback has been the subject of most research on assessment for learning, but that is not to say that informal feedback is not valuable.

#### **6. Feedback has a motivational (or demotivational) effect on learners**

In Hattie and Timperley's model each of the three types of feedback operates at four levels: the task level, the performance processes, self-regulation or self-assessment by the learner and the personal level (usually positive). Feedback concerning

execution of the task is only likely to have a positive impact when the task is to be repeated, while feedback on the performance process –or generic feedback -can be applied to other assessments and is thus potentially motivational. While enabling self-regulation can also be empowering, praise at the personal level has least impact and this is contrary to the widely supported practice of ‘sweetening’ critical feedback with positive comments.

The impact of assessment on a learner’s sense of self-worth has a significant and often under-recognised influence on a learner’s motivation to take-in and act on feedback. Comments and grades give individuals powerful messages about themselves as learners and for many learners assessment produces negative emotions which are not counteracted by positive comments (Falchikov & Boud, 2007).

## **7. Assessment can provide reverse feedback**

Black and Wiliam (2009) assert that teachers can elicit much information on their teaching practice from how learners respond to assessment tasks in what they term ‘reverse feedback’. If learners do not perform well in assessment, then more feedback may not be sufficient and further teaching and learning may be required and/or tasks adapted (Hattie & Timperley 2007; Laurillard 2002).

### **4.2. Good practice for assessment arising from research and literature**

#### **4.2.1. The problem of assessment in Higher Education**

Assessment has always been about measurement of learning that is assessment *of* learning, but recently the focus has shifted on to the key role of assessment in driving learning or assessment *for* learning (Stobart, 2008). Preoccupation with reliability, validity, implementation methods and quality control has been superseded by challenges to the traditional assessment methods of unseen examinations and essays, and by calls for greater authenticity and alignment with teaching (Biggs, 2003). A strong feature of assessment for learning is recognition of the importance of formative assessment and feedback.

The interest in assessment for learning has been partly driven by learner satisfaction surveys which suggest that assessment is an area of higher dissatisfaction than other aspects of teaching and learning. Assessment for learning is also a consequence of the wider appeal of theoretically informed pedagogies such as social constructivist learning, problem-based learning, communities of practice and online collaborative learning. Constructivist and collaborative pedagogies do not align well with traditional assessments.

Surveys of UK postgraduates, part-time students, campus-based and distance learners all indicate that learners would like better and more timely feedback (Park and Wells, 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2008a; Yorke and Longden, 2008b; Simpson, 2002). Studies from both the UK and Hong Kong suggest that that students and staff

are confused about the purpose of feedback often linking it strongly to justification of a grade (Handley et al., 2008; Carless, 2006). Staff claim to write good quality feedback, but students disagree and find feedback unusable. Walker's (2009) study from the Open University suggested that feed forward is only useful if accompanied by some explanation or detail which is often lacking. Generic skill-development comments are most useable: these can be used for future assignments as well as improving on draft work, but are not routinely provided to learners. Although there is evidence that students value feedback, feel that they deserve it and sometimes claim to pay it close attention (Higgins et al, 2002), there is little evidence of a wholesale shift away from summative towards formative assessment and assessment for learning (Crisp, 2007; Lizzio and Wilson, 2008; Rust and O'Donovan, 2007).

To compound the problems, many students do not feel that they can approach their teachers to ask for clarification and advice, although this depends on their relationships with their teachers, teacher credibility, their own confidence or taking action through desperation if they have failed (Poulos and Mahony, 2008; Flint and Johnson, 2011).

#### **4.2.2. Theorising assessment and feedback**

Much of the student dissatisfaction arises from frustration arising from a lack of recognition for their work and lack of clarity over how to progress. An understanding of how feedback functions and how assessment can sustain learning over time helps conceptualise the problem and point towards some solutions.

##### *Sustainable assessment*

Effective feedback firstly informs learners of any gap between their performance and an achievement outcome and, secondly, feed forward – or developmental feedback – guides the learner on what to do to next to improve (Black & Wiliam 2003; Hattie & Timperley 2007; Sadler, 2005). Feedback can be generic and refer to transferable skills, or be task specific and relevant only to the content of individual assignments. Including feedback as part of an ongoing learning dialogue is also important and accords with a constructivist view of learning where the learner is the active maker of meaning. Dialogue allows learners to clarify assessment aims and criteria, identify progress and develop self-reliance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Hughes 2011).

Boud (2000) introduced the term 'sustainable assessment' to emphasise that assessment activities can have a dual purpose: dealing with the immediate task and preparing the learner for future and lifelong learning. The importance of self-reliance is taken further by Carless et al. (2011:3) who use the term 'sustainable feedback' to describe:

..dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, whilst also developing the ability to self-regulate on future tasks.

Sustainable practices shift the onus from the tutor to deliver feedback onto the student to self-regulate their work. Multi-stage feedback is essential for sustainability and a two-stage assessment process involving a draft and a final assessment is an

example of this. Other ways to promote sustainable feedback include involving students in dialogues about learning and stimulating students to develop the dispositions of monitoring and evaluating their own learning. Peer feedback on oral presentations or using technologies such as discussion boards can provide examples of this.

There are advantages for the assessor in taking an assessment for learning perspective and engaging in dialogue with learners. Assessment provides information for teachers on the impact of their teaching on learning and can in principle encourage improved pedagogy. Viewing assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning with as much potential for creativity as any other activity might also motivate assessors who often feel overburdened and unrewarded by marking.

*Learning careers and assessment careers.*

This literature on feedback focuses on pedagogy and learning, but learning events do not occur in isolation. As well as the cognitive aspect, the context influences learning and learning is socially mediated in that it involves social interaction. This context includes all aspects of a learners' life past and present, their identities and it follows that a learner brings previous experience of learning to any new experience. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) have used the term learning career to capture this longitudinal and contextualised view of learning. In a learning career, learners bring dispositions to learn from previous events which have evolved through their learning and lifecourse pathway. These dispositions are shaped by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and generation.

Ecclestone & Pryor (2003) use the term 'assessment career' to focus on the role that assessment has in shaping learning over time. Assessment is an emotive process and dealing with past success or failure forms part of a learner identity (Dweck, 1999). Peelo (2002) also suggests that learners are often overloaded with assessments at key transition points, resulting in an additional emotional burden.

Thus, learners' previous experiences of assessment influence their response to assessment and feedback so that, for example, emotionally negative experiences of critique and perhaps failure may influence the way learners perceive marks and interpret and act on feedback. Even successful learners who have been highly praised in the past may bring with them an expectation of continued high achievement.

A focus on an assessment career highlights an underlying problem with many assessment regimes: that assessments are undertaken on a piecemeal basis and that there is little continuity. Feedback tends to focus on the immediate task and not surprisingly does not routinely include feed forward to future assessment. Meanwhile, any impact of feedback on a learner's performance is rarely monitored as part of an assessment career. Hughes (2011) has suggested that ipsative assessment (assessment which is based on a learner's previous performance) which is cumulative over time might provide an alternative and more helpful approach to

feedback than the dominant model of feedback which is directed by immediate marking criteria and standards.

#### **4.2.3. Good practice and guidelines on assessment for learning**

The wealth of literature and research on improving assessment has been captured in useful guidelines and principles. Gibbs has produced eight conditions for assessment for learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Gibbs, 2006). The first three are largely uncontested and involve the design of the assessment task: assessment should distribute student time and effort over the curriculum and should engage students with high expectations. Examples include: group work, use of e-portfolios and reflective practice, practice based assessments and authentic writing and design tasks.

The other conditions refer to feedback where there is less agreement on good practice. Gibbs expects that feedback should be timely, of appropriate quantity and quality to address learning not marks and be relevant to the task. Finally, it is essential that the feedback is received, understood and acted upon by learners

This last point has been supported and addressed in more detail by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) who have devised a series of principles for effective formative assessment.

1. Good feedback helps clarify what good performance is
2. Good feedback facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.
3. Good feedback delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
4. Good feedback encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
5. Good feedback encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
6. Good feedback provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
7. Good feedback provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

These principles aim to shift learners away from the extrinsic motivation associated with summative grades towards intrinsic motivation, self-reliance and sustainable assessment. Details of how these principles can be successfully applied are provided by the Re-Engineering Assessment Practice (REAP) project discussed in section 4.3.

#### **4.2.4. Summary**

A literature review of assessment practice in the Higher Education sector reveals that there is perceived to be a problem with creating and maintaining processes of assessment which are formative and useful to the student. There is evidence that assessment practices in higher education institutions could better equip students for self-sustainability in a learning society. There are criticisms both of the assessment

processes themselves and the way they are carried out, and concern about the failure of trust and subsequent loss of student engagement when students do not understand the purpose or intent of written feedback. Many researchers assume that there is more summative activity than formative assessment, even though it is widely accepted that it is formative assessment and feedback that leads to more learning.

There is a strong case that assessment should prepare learners to become self-reliant and that assessment needs both to meet the specific and immediate goals of a course as well as establishing a longer-term basis for students to undertake their own assessment activities in the future. Guidance is available on how this might be achieved.

### **4.3. Use of technology to support good formative assessment practice**

While it is not clear that there is an established base of 'best practice' regarding assessment in the HE sector, there is at least some agreement on the aims of those projects supported by JISC: the REAP project, for instance, aims to re-design assessment to enhance the development of learner self-regulation and the skills required for lifelong learning<sup>4</sup> while 'Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment' (TESTA)<sup>5</sup> aims to identify study behaviour, generate assessment patterns to foster deeper learning across whole programmes, and debunk regulatory myths which prevent assessment for learning. Projects with very similar aims which use technology to improve assessment practice receive positive feedback from both students and staff, though as we may note, are not devoid of their own problems. If we accept the initial finding of the literature review that current assessment practice is not deemed satisfactory, then it is perhaps unsurprising that coherent, well thought through initiatives do attract very positive responses. It could be argued that simply the act of thinking through a coherent and common assessment practice will inevitably lead to improved satisfaction on the part of students.

The projects reviewed yield a wealth of often competing findings. The initial findings from TESTA are compelling largely through the scope of that project. They note that there is extremely high variety of assessment with some programmes in their research project having as many as 17 different varieties of assessment. They reject the common assumption that innovation in assessment *per se* is 'a good thing'. The project also identified extraordinarily wide variations in crucial aspects of assessment practice, within an institution's QA regulations and validation procedures.

#### **4.3.1. The technology of assessment**

A wide range of technologies are used in projects which aim to improve the effectiveness of assessment feedback and student engagement. Some look at the

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<sup>4</sup> [www.reap.ac.uk](http://www.reap.ac.uk)

<sup>5</sup> [www.testa.ac.uk](http://www.testa.ac.uk)

commonplace technologies of email and online feedback, but more innovative projects look at audio and video technology. Audio visual feedback can be given in a number of ways, as a report on a piece of assessed work, 'embedded' as a hyperlink to make specific points as they arise in that work, or even 'live' as an online conversation about the work with the student. The ASSET project at the University of Reading<sup>6</sup>, for instance, reports that using video has made academic staff think more, and in some cases differently, about the ways in which they deliver feedback to students and they now see video as an effective means of making feedback more useful and engaging for students. At the University of Strathclyde, an audio feedback project received equally enthusiastic responses, with assessors reporting that they were giving higher quality feedback than traditional written feedback. Feedback was provided in a variety of ways: audio-only method was used to give feedback for poster presentations and formal presentations where assessors provided audio feedback using a digital voice recorder then shared the audio files with learners via Blackboard ensuring secure, private transfer, *Audio-Visual Asynchronous* where students submitted assignments as PDF files electronically and assessors commented by inserting audio files into the documents at specific points and *Audio Visual Synchronous* where assessors would take a screen capture which recorded both the audio as well as the screen activity whilst the assessor actively scrolled through the document. A link was sent to the students who clicked the link to view the video.

Researchers found that while the Audio-Only method was least popular amongst all students, the high performing students generally were more enthusiastic about audio feedback whereas lower performing learners generally preferred written feedback. Assessors were split in their preference between Audio Visual Asynchronous and Audio-Visual Synchronous.

Sheffield Hallam<sup>7</sup> has introduced an electronic Feedback Wizard tool, developed in-house using Visual Basic and Microsoft Office functionality to create a tool linking feedback to learning outcomes. The Feedback Wizard allows markers to generate consistent individual feedback documents for an entire student cohort using an assignment-specific feedback template containing a matrix of assessment criteria and feedback comments. Researchers found that online publication of grades and feedback through the VLE, and the 'adaptive release' of grades - encouraging students to engage with their written feedback and identify key learning points in order to activate the release of their mark - were found to significantly enhance students' engagement with their feedback.

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<sup>6</sup>

<http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jisc.ac.uk%2Fmedia%2Fdocuments%2Fprogrammes%2Finstitutionalinnovation%2Fasset-final%2520report.pdf&sa=D&sntz=1&usq=AFQjCNHG3oobyIOiMDwQmOgcfS7fStxg>

<sup>7</sup> Technology, Feedback, Action!: Impact of Learning Technology on Students' Engagement with Feedback <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/Perspectives/>

A number of projects have also been carried out using Computer Based Assessment (CBA) or Computer Aided Assessment (CAA). Assessment projects involving CBA are usually driven by a need to save time, money or both rather than for pedagogical reasons, while CAA projects can be seen as attempts to create more time to help assessors give better feedback, but this highlights the caveat to most of the above projects; the quality, cost and usability of the chosen software.

#### **4.3.2. Sustainability and efficiency of technology enhanced assessment**

Although the projects briefly outlined above used a combination of common software (Word, Explorer), professional products (Blackboard), specialist software (Questionmark, Perception) and bespoke custom produced solutions, none was deemed perfect in any case. There were issues surrounding cost, utility and training for staff and students. Despite the popularity of the audio or video approach, for instance, all reports recognised the barriers in getting all staff to engage with such software, and staff training was a major factor in all such projects.. The search for a cost-effective, easy to use system that allows personalised, formative assessment feedback to be easily provided by all assessors, however non-technical, continues.

In the projects evaluated, there was no single dominant software or technology that supported good formative assessment practice. The simplest projects tried to utilise email as part of a feedback process and many used the capabilities of the VLE – usually Blackboard or Moodle. A good example is the development of a customised Assignment Handler extension for the Blackboard Grade Centre, used by Sheffield Hallam to pilot the adaptive release of grades; this encouraged students to engage with their written feedback and identify key learning points in order to activate the release of their mark. Commonplace Office packages such as Word were used to embed comment or even A/V feedback at specific points in a piece of assessed work. Audio and video software were used to allow a more personal approach to feedback, rather than relying on the written word, while technologies like SKYPE can be used to allow remote ‘face to face’ interviews.

More specialist software used included Aorpa, developed by John Hamer from New Zealand and PeerMark, part of the Turnitin suite, both used to support the University of Strathclyde in piloting its peer review implementations.<sup>8</sup> Questionmark Perception was used for objective diagnostic, formative and low-stakes summative assessments by Loughborough University and by Dundee University for formative assessments. Additionally, Dundee used some ad-hoc approaches using JavaScript and Perl as well as a variety of e-Portfolio packages.

Several projects developed bespoke software and technology processes, including the Subject specific, Operational and Strategic (SOS) model developed by the University of Westminster. In this project students reflected on feedback received in a learning journal shared with their personal tutor. Integral to the reflection process is

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/elearning/litig/PEERfinalreport.pdf>

an online questionnaire (called e-Reflect) about the coursework that a student completes after receiving their marked work.<sup>9</sup> The ASSET project, led by the University of Reading, is looking to develop an open source 'version' based on the CORE software. This has been viewed by the team as a welcome development to ensure sustainability in the use of video for T&L at Reading as well as creating a 'framework' that other Higher Education Institutes can directly adopt and/adapt. The University of reading supplied a useful rationale for their choice of software.<sup>10</sup>

A useful approach to selecting technology is outlined by TESTA. This proposes that assessment processes should use readily-available technologies which are quick to learn, easy to use, which are efficient after the start-up period, saving time & effort and increasing productivity and which bring significant learning benefit to students. However, at the moment there seems to be no agreement as to what software or technology solution that might be.

#### **4.3.3. Summary of lessons from innovative assessment projects**

Technology projects are can be very technologically driven but the ones reported above clearly draw on the principles of assessment for learning. A key aim of these projects is to improve learner's opportunities to engage with feedback through technology use. The immediacy of feedback can also be enhanced with technology. Of course increasing learner engagement or timeliness is pointless if the feedback is not useable or does not adhere to REAP principles in other ways, but there is evidence from these projects that assessors who take part reflect on the feedback they provide and also make improvements in the quality of feedback.

Although no single technological approach has so far emerged as clearly 'the best', there are several useful observations which arise from these projects.

- Almost all projects report a positive impact on student and staff as a result of their project
- Use of new technology can prompt staff to reflect on their assessment practice
- No single technology solution is apparent. All technologies used have both strengths and weaknesses, whether they are generic or bespoke.
- All e-assessment projects required significant levels of staff (and sometimes student) training
- Students need to be clear on the purpose of feedback if they are to engage in appropriate ways-simply making feedback easier to access is not sufficient
- Projects need to be implemented at least at course level not by a collection of enthusiastic individuals

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<sup>9</sup> Making Assessment Count

[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/curriculumdelivery/mac\\_final\\_reportV5.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/curriculumdelivery/mac_final_reportV5.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.reading.ac.uk/asset/Whatisasset/asset-ASSETSoftware.aspx>

- E-assessment projects require significant investment in technology, staff training and course redesign. Significant support from senior managers is needed if a major project is to have any chance of success
- Benefits emerge whenever the feedback process is shifted from a transmission model of monologue to a dialogue through use of e-tools and simple practices to encourage student reflection.

#### **4.4. The Quality Assurance framework**

Nationally, assessment practice is regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency. The Quality Code is intended to provide a reference point for Higher Education institutions, and the guidance related to assessment is laid out in Chapter B6: "Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning". This describes several purposes for assessment including providing feedback to promote learning and improve student performance; evaluating knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills; grading to establish performance and inform decisions about progress; and enabling the public to know that individuals have attained particular levels of achievement. It offers definitions of assessment as being "diagnostic, formative or summative", but notes that assessment practice often involves more than one of these purposes. It identifies two specific expectations for assessment:

- Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit.
- Higher education providers ensure the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

The QAA identifies several "Indicators of sound practice", which include specifying that institutions are responsible for designing, approving, monitoring and reviewing assessment strategies; ensuring standards are maintained; and encouraging effective learning; and do so in ways that are explicit, reliable and valid.

The expectation that assessment contributes to student learning is developed mainly through examples. These include using feedback loops to improve future performance; linking assessment to students' research; peer assessment (both through receiving feedback but also through giving feedback, which encourages evaluation and benchmarking of their own performance); self-reflective accounts; providing students with experience of different forms of assessment, and encouraging them to synthesise learning from different parts of the programme; and so on.

Further notes on timing and amount of assessment support this, including recommendations that institutions consider avoiding excessive summative assessment and emphasising support for learning, including through formative assessment. A further note advises that students should have adequate time to

reflect on their learning before being assessed. The advice on feedback includes attention to timing, recommending that feedback is provided "at a time when they will be able to use it and are most likely to take notice of it", particularly during modules. It is also recommended that feedback be provided from various sources, where these can help learning, including from teachers, personal tutors, peers and practitioners; and further, offering general advice about standards, including making available a summary of all comments provided to all students in an anonymous form, or providing anonymised examples of work of different grades.

## 5. Conceptualising the case study and comparing IOE with the real world

### 5.1. Describing the rich picture and what is known about the IOE practice

The map drawn up of IOE assessment practice (see appendix 1) consists of a mainland divided into provinces that are well or poorly connected and an island of activity that is largely unknown at present representing the programme administrators.

The map has at its heart the student experience province not only because this is the basis of the project, but also because this is an area where we have rich data. The student experience links to IOE policy with a road because policy concerns with the technical aspects of assessment mirror the student concerns with marks and equitable practice. The shift towards assessment for learning in policy is also matched by student expectations of useable feedback.

The teaching staff province is less clearly defined and positioned on the map. It has strong link to the student experience because teaching staff receive information from students but there is a mismatch between student and staff perceptions of feedback quality indicating that the route between these two provinces is not so direct.

A route to the senior leaders' province from the policy province is well-defined. Senior leaders are concerned about the variation in awareness and interpretation of policy and aware of areas of student dissatisfaction with feedback timing and quality.

The External Examiner province is unclear and also very much on the fringes of the mainland. External examiners also vary in their approach and some follow the technical view of assessment in policy documents and which is also prevalent in the wider sector practice, while others demonstrate a critical view of the developmental approach to assessment in their comments on feedback e.g. in offering advice for weaker students, challenging stronger students and showing an interest in viewing feedback on draft work.

The sector practice includes two provinces which are strongly defined and these are the technological innovation in assessment and feedback and the good practice

guidelines which draw on wider research and theorising of assessment for learning. The overall sector practice is less well defined and is represented on the map as a large area of uncertainty and danger in the current climate of retrenchment and funding cuts with high mountain ranges and sea monsters.

A mountain range also divides much the IOE practice from the sector. External Examiners provide some comments about written feedback but this is limited and variable as above. Apart from the funded projects and technological innovation at the IOE which engage with sector good practice and assessment literature, and some small scale piloting of assessment reform such as the pass/fail only initiative, there is little evidence of engagement. A river represents this narrow flow of information on innovation, good practice and theorising to the IOE from the wider HE community. Some programme leaders are aware that not all IOE staff members are keeping up with sector shifts in assessment practice. Recent research on student experience at the IOE is just beginning to be reported externally including international journals so the river flowing out from the IOE flows to the sea and becomes diffused in a delta that includes a wealth of research reporting from other UK institutions as well as internationally.

## **5.2. Comparing IOE with sector good practice**

There is evidence here that IOE practice on assessment and feedback is a microcosm of sector practice.

Firstly, the problems identified at the IOE are also identified in the literature such as learner dissatisfaction with feedback, lack of feed forward, over-emphasis on summative at the expense of formative assessment, uncertainty over criteria and standards and lack of encouragement of learners to develop self-reliance or sustainability.

Secondly, innovation at the IOE parallels innovation in the sector in addressing some of these issues. The ipsative assessment innovation and the pass/fail only project both demonstrated that students can be helped to make better use of feedback and assessors can be encouraged to provide more useable feedback. Use of technology for feedback as well as peer and self-assessment also helps learners engage and develop self-reliance. As with the sector wide findings, innovations at the IOE are small scale and limited to enthusiasts and the issue of scaling up is not easily addressed. Innovation without increase of resource is also a challenge for both sector wide and IOE projects.

Thirdly, the shift away from the technical side of summative assessment towards assessment for learning, captured in recent theory of assessment, in QA documents and in sector good practice guidelines, is also evident in IOE documentation. While many IOE staff members are also changing their practice or are aware of a need for change, there is a tailback of staff who have not yet moved on from historical practices such as use of essays and use of feedback to explain and justify grades. There also may be a pervasive view that feedback should include plenty of praise to

motivate learners and a lack of awareness of current thinking that useable feed forward and emphasis on longer-term progression is more motivational than praise.

Finally, the localisation of assessment for learning initiatives is a feature of both sector practice and IOE practice. The TESTA project, for example, has demonstrated that projects are difficult to scale up because of widely differing views on the both purposes of assessment and the resources that should be directed towards change. Similarly IOE good practice appears unevenly spread across the institution.

From this comparison we can conclude that the expertise and the potential for assessment and feedback reform exists at the IOE, but at present resources are not being put to best use. An overarching theme is one of missed opportunities for enhancing learning through assessment. However, there is evidence that a technical approach to assessment has begun shifting towards a more developmental one and this suggests that the time is ripe for change.

### **5.2.1. Identifying missed opportunities for enhancing learning**

Given the picture of the IOE formative assessment practice as one of missed opportunities for enhancing learning, there are many ways in which assessment could become a more developmental process drawing on the assessment and technological innovation literature. These include: disaggregating grades and feedback; strengthening links between draft and final assignment feedback and/or linking feedback across modules; feed forward that is useable in the longer term; making assessment criteria and standards clearer; shifting to multi-stage assessment and promoting assessment variety to replace essays and to include self and peer assessment. We consider each of these suggestions for the project in turn next.

### **5.2.2. Disaggregating grades and feedback**

Delays to feedback on marked assignments limit learning for students and disaggregating grades and feedback might be a solution. This would enable first markers to send provisional feedback to students as soon as a piece is marked rather than waiting until grades have been agreed and sent to the Examination Board. This shorter turn-around would meet guidelines from QA and sector on the timeliness of feedback. Grades can have a negative influence on learner response to feedback and this is another reason for disaggregation. The process could be automated to improve the speed of delivery of feedback to students.

### **5.2.3. Strengthening a longitudinal approach to feedback**

One possibility here is to develop a feedback record or 'feedback CV' that students develop and submit with their assignments. The feedback CV would begin with a learner reflecting on previous experiences of assessment to identify any practices which were helpful as well as blocks to be overcome. This record would then document feed forward they receive on the programme and the actions they have taken. Assessors would then be able to provide ipsative feedback to students on progress made through acting on feedback and meeting assessment goals. The same process could be used for giving feedback on drafts as feedback for final assignments.

#### **5.2.4. Feed forward that is useable in the longer-term**

This applies particularly to summative assessments where feedback is often limited to justification of a grade. Feed forward can be provided which identifies generic themes which can be applied to future assignments. It is particularly helpful if these generic points are illustrated with examples from the current work or exemplars of correct practice. Comments that are too general may be difficult to interpret. An emphasis on feed forward also encourages the assessor to move away from giving excessive praise and/or correcting errors towards facilitating future learning.

#### **5.2.5. Clearer criteria and standards**

Making assessment criteria and standards clearer to students is not a direct aim of this project although if students do not have opportunities to engage with criteria and standards, this will hamper development of their assessment careers. The Assessment Working Group is looking at rewriting documentation on assessment that would address this issue and progress will be noted and integrated into the Assessment Career framework by encouraging and supporting dialogue between peers and between tutors and peers.

#### **5.2.6. Multi-stage assessment including peer and self-assessment**

This project is not primarily concerned with assessment and curriculum redesign. However, we recognise that for a longitudinal and developmental approach to assessment to succeed, the over-reliance on essays or long written assignments may need to change because these assignments may not help learners develop M level academic thinking and writing approaches over time. Smaller steps (scaffolding) may help some learners in the transition to M level especially if these steps are formatively assessed and feed into multi-stage summative assessments. Examples could include short book or article reviews, summaries of an argument, essay plans, critical reflections on practice etc. Supported peer and self-assessment are also an important part of enabling learners to become more self-reliant.

#### **5.2.7. Use of technology to support assessment innovation**

There is clearly a role for technology in supporting a longitudinal approach to assessment through improving record keeping and student reflection (e.g. through e-journals, wikis, blogs and reports which can be made available in Moodle) and providing exemplars or patterns and facilitating learners in engaging with feedback. However, technological solutions will not necessarily improve the quality and usability of feedback and this may require staff development. Use of new technological may also require considerable staff development and so we aim to use existing technologies in the most straightforward and cost effective way. We also note that small scale innovations by enthusiasts do not necessarily lead to large scale adoption and the scalability and sustainability of a new approach or framework for assessment is paramount.

## 6. Generating solutions: the Assessment Career framework

### 6.1. Theory - driven evaluation

In the context of enhancing assessment practice, a very simple model might look like Figure 1:



Figure 1: A simple 'black box' model of assessment practice

However, more sophisticated models can be developed, for example by relating feedback to improved learning. Figure 2 illustrates this, incorporating factors identified in this project's literature review that might enhance learning.

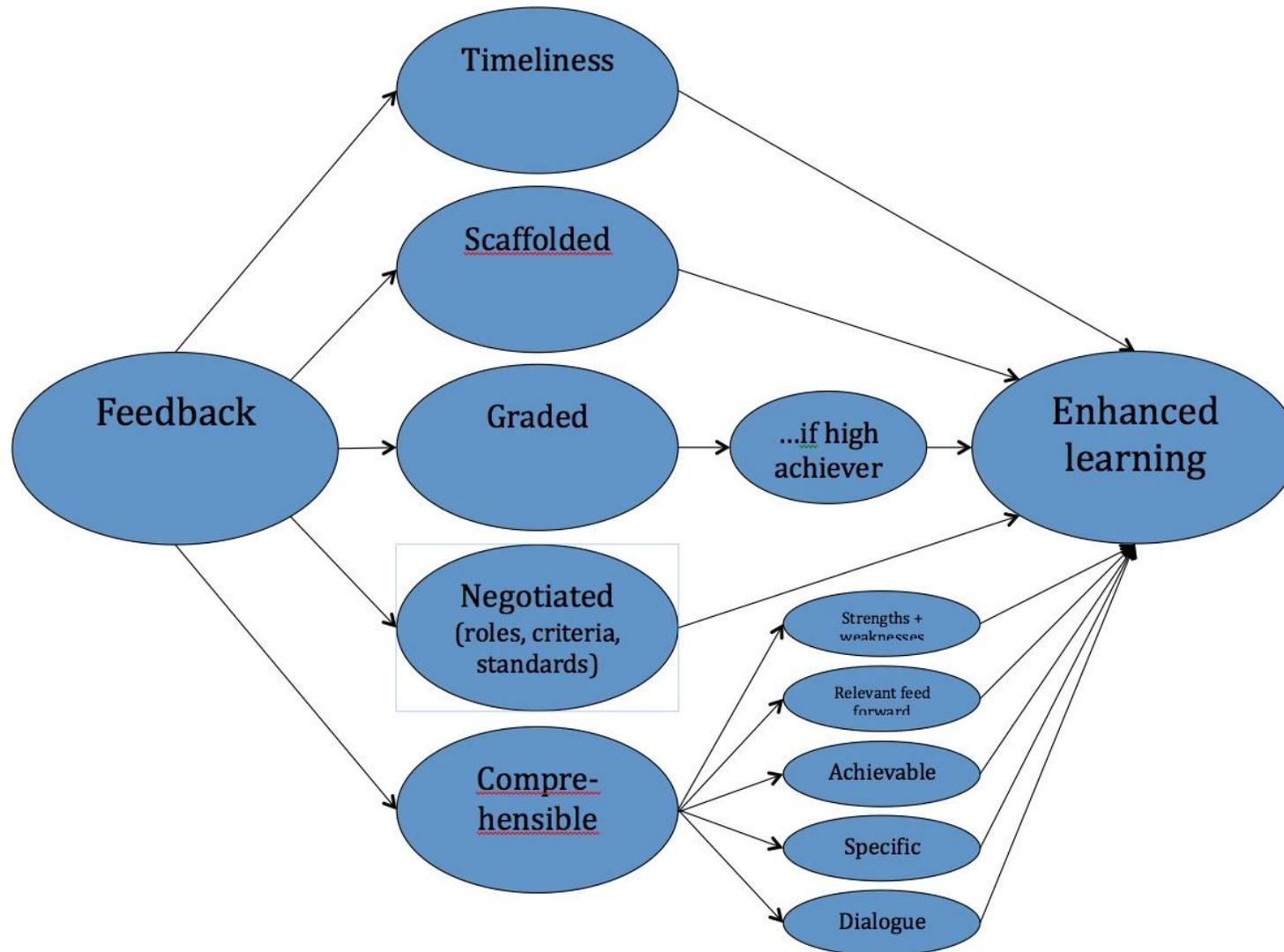


Figure 2: A model of assessment for learning

This figure can be used as a planning tool for the project, in several ways.

Firstly, questions can be asked about further developments of the model. For example, should an intermediary node be added between “relevant feed forward” and “enhanced learning”, qualifying this so that the link only holds where there is coherent progression through the curriculum (rather than ‘pick and mix’ independent modules)? Should there be an additional link from Feedback to Enhanced Learning relating to whether the feedback comes from peers or tutors? Developing the model in this way might represent a contribution to knowledge arising from the project’s work.

Secondly, specific evaluation questions can be asked in relation to particular nodes or links in the model. For example:

- Is the timeliness of feedback consistent across institutional practice?
- If feedback can be scaffolded in different ways, do some encourage and others undermine learners’ autonomy?
- Where roles, criteria or standards are negotiated, are these well understood by learners? What is the influence of negotiation between teachers (e.g. around moderation), and do teachers understand roles, criteria and standards in consistent ways?
- How prevalent are the uses of tactics such as listing strengths and weaknesses or giving ipsative feedback; giving relevant feed-forward; ensuring feedback is achievable; ensuring feedback is specific; or encouraging dialogue about feedback, across the institution’s practice?
- In relation to dialogue around feedback, is there equity of opportunity and volume of engagement? How is such dialogue undertaken? What are the costs and benefits of such activity?

Thirdly, the model can be used to monitor the project’s activity. As the project progresses, tasks can be mapped against the model to see which areas are being focused upon and which neglected. This will help provide conceptual direction for decisions within the project.

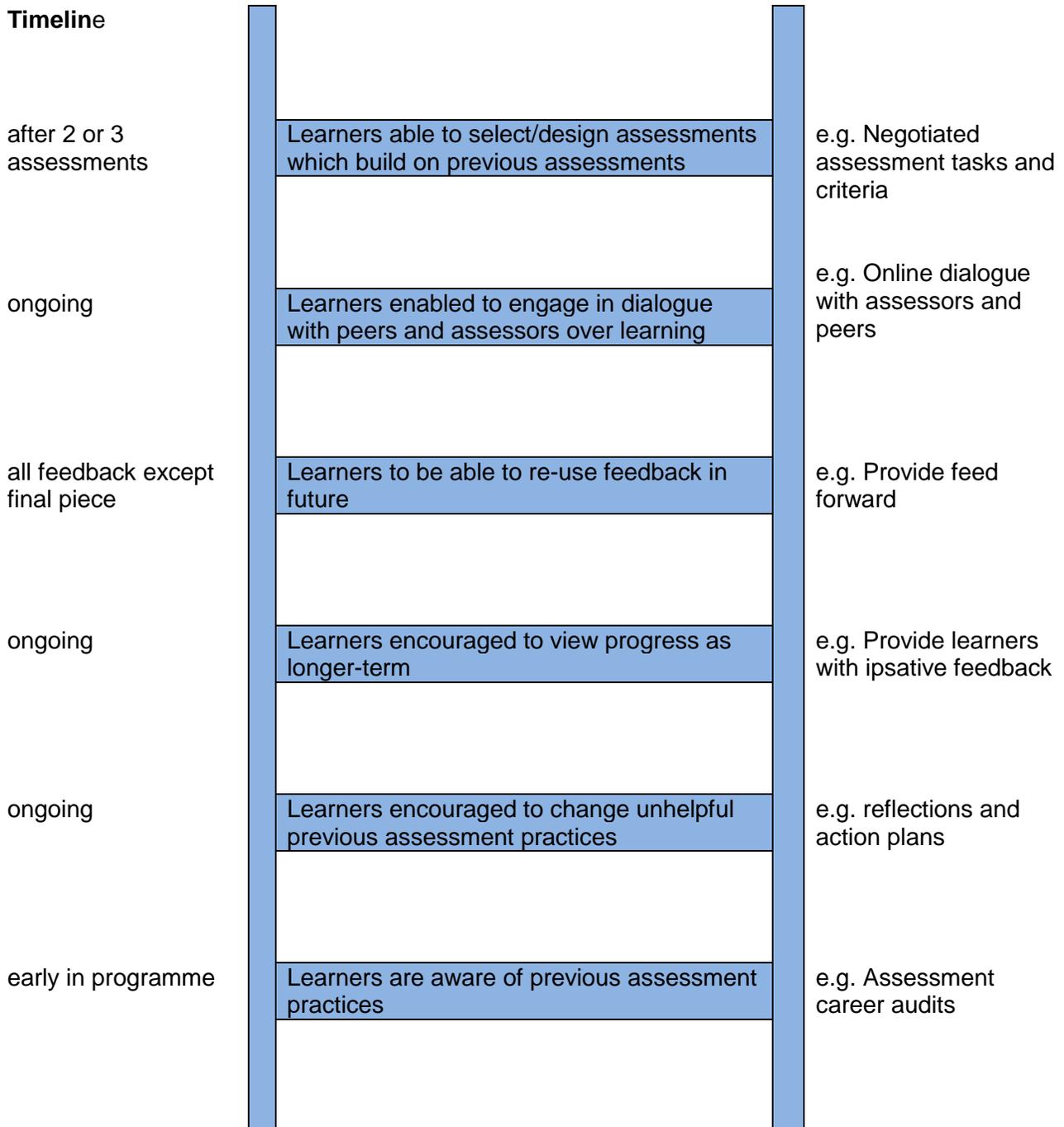
Finally, the model can be used to identify inefficiencies in the system and/or additional activities required and to make adjustments between proportions of time lecturers spend on teaching, grading and providing feedback if necessary.

## **6.2. Assessment Career framework**

The aim of this project is to develop a framework which can be used to ensure that the best possible use is made of formative assessment for learning that develops learner autonomy while maximising use of available resources. A framework is especially valuable in the IOE context where assessment is undergoing reform and there is a range of views on the purposes of assessment, confusion over institutional requirements/student entitlement and where practice varies as a consequence. This framework is presented here as a starting position and it will be modified throughout the project in response to consultation and piloting.

The framework has two representations: a ladder and a set of guiding principles.

### 6.2.1. Assessment Career ladder



### 6.2.2. Principles for supporting Assessment Careers

A set of principles are listed below which in combination will support a learner in an assessment career. The principles appear on the ladder above to give an indication of which ones might apply earlier on and later on in a programme of study but this is not a definitive order. It might not be appropriate to apply all the principles to a programme and this will depend on the discipline, level and learning goals of the programme.

Assessment Career Principles:

1. **Learners are aware of previous assessment practices.** This principle is important because if learners have habitual practices which are unhelpful then these need to be identified so that the practices do not further hinder learning. An example of raising awareness of practice could be an assessment career audit to identify learners who have ignored challenging feedback in the past. Research by Dweck (1999) suggests that those who view their ability as fixed see any 'failure' as evidence for low ability, while those who take a developmental approach view failure as evidence for a need for learning.
2. **Learners are encouraged to change unhelpful assessment practices.** Once learners are aware of habitual unhelpful practices they can be encouraged or persuaded to change. For example, the learners who have ignored challenging feedback in the past can be encouraged to view the feedback as developmental and not as evidence of low ability in their reflections and action plans. Dweck has shown that learners who have negative self-beliefs can be persuaded that they can progress. Hughes (2011) has indicated that ipsative feedback can help.
3. **Learners view progress as longer-term and not just about grades.** Grades have a huge influence on learners and low or lower than expected grades can reduce the impact of potentially helpful feedback. A learner who is disappointed with a grade might view feedback as either harsh and unfair or unhelpful for attaining a desired grade. Ipsative feedback which focuses on progress towards self-referential goals rather than external standards can potentially provide all learners with a positive aim towards a personal best. Research by Hughes et al. (2011) indicates that ipsative feedback can be motivational.
4. **Learners are able to apply feedback on one assignment to the next.** Feedback is only effective if learners can use it. Feedback that justifies a grade cannot be easily used for future assignments. For example, feed forward that addresses a generic skill such as structuring writing can readily be applied to future assignments. A study by Walker (2009) shows that learners value developmental feedback more than other forms in agreement with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) review of what makes feedback effective.
5. **Learners engage in dialogue with peers and assessors over learning.** It is widely accepted that learning is an active process and that dialogue promotes learning and the same must apply to learning from assessment. An example might

be learners using a VLE to reflect on feedback and discuss this with peers and tutors. A review of research by Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) indicates that dialogue with both peers and teachers is helpful to learners.

6. **Learners select or design assessments which build on previous assessments and increasingly challenge the learner.** Assessment which enables learning to take place must be authentic and challenging for each learner. Tasks that are too easy will encourage superficial learning while tasks that are too challenging might dispirit learners. For example, in projects, dissertations or doctoral studies learners design their research and/or assessment outcomes to suit their interest and capability. Carless et al. (2011) argued that for assessment to be sustainable, learners must become increasingly self-reliant and less reliant on teachers. Self-reliant learners can judge for themselves what kind of challenge they are ready for and can self-assess.

### **6.3. Possible benefits of using the Assessment Career framework**

The following are possible benefits of using the framework and will be used in evaluating the pilots:

1. Emphasis on longer-term progress motivates students
2. Students become aware of unhelpful practices in the past (e.g. viewing critical feedback as personally damaging especially if the grade is poor) and are supported in making changes.
3. Assessment tasks have some progressive links so that students can apply what is learnt from one assessment to the next.
4. Assessment becomes a key part of the learning process which makes it more meaningful and rewarding for assessors.
5. In incremental approach to writing feedback means that assessors do not keep repeating the same feedback to students over a number of assignments, but they help identify progress and next steps.
6. Assessors and students can identify students who are not progressing rather than only those who are not achieving and this is more useful for advising students about continuing or not continuing with a course after failing a component. It also means that higher achievers who are not reaching full potential are more visible and can also be encouraged to set new goals.
7. Multi-stage assessment helps to scaffold learners particularly those who are not familiar with the academic expectations of M level work in social science disciplines.

## **6.4. Scaling up and embedding the AC framework**

### **6.4.1. Alignment with IOE strategy, policy and QA/QE**

The institute is in a position of readiness for change in assessment policy and practice and this will begin in 2012/13 after the Assessment Working Group (AWG) has reported its findings and recommendations. The AC project leader is a member of the AWG and will ensure that there is alignment between the outcomes of this review and policy changes and changes to QA and student entitlement documentation. The AWG will draw on the Baseline report in producing recommendations. The IOE committee structure will be used to discuss and agree scaling up and embedding of the emerging AC framework. The efficiency issue will be particularly important here and providing evidence from the pilots of efficiency savings/enhancements at no extra cost will be very important. The Steering Group, chaired by the Project Director and Pro-Director: Learning and International will be both advise on strategic work and act as champions for the project to help gain widespread support.

### **6.4.2. Stakeholder engagement**

A stakeholder engagement plan has been drawn up and will be monitored and amended by the project leader. The president of the Student Union has suggested that students will welcome this initiative; however there may be student expectations that will need to be managed. The steering group will provide a helpful sounding board for stakeholder engagement issues.

### **6.4.3. Staff development and administrative support**

Expertise on formative assessment is fairly prevalent at the IOE but at present this is not shared amongst a community of practice. Lunchtime conversations –a series of staff development events held each year- and discussions at the annual Teaching Conference will encourage more openness about practice and sharing of expertise and ideas. Staff will also be encouraged to attend Moodle development events where they will be able to discuss use of technology to enhance assessment and the AC framework as well as develop their digital literacies. The strong link between the Learning Technologies Unit and the project (2 key project members are located in this Unit) will ensure that opportunities are not missed.

However, uptake of staff development is unpredictable in the current climate. Opportunities to increase discussion on technology enhanced assessment will also arise at Curriculum Review meetings and in discussion about a related Open Mode strategy to increase online provision. Strong links between the project and the two Faculty Directors of Learning and Teaching (one chairs the AWG and the other is a pilot leader) will help us ensure that these opportunities are exploited.

#### 6.4.4. ICT infrastructure

The project will work closely with the Learning Technologies and ICT teams who are managing the change to Moodle so that the technologies developed as part of the project are embedded. The deputy project leader and the Learning Technologist will lead on this area.

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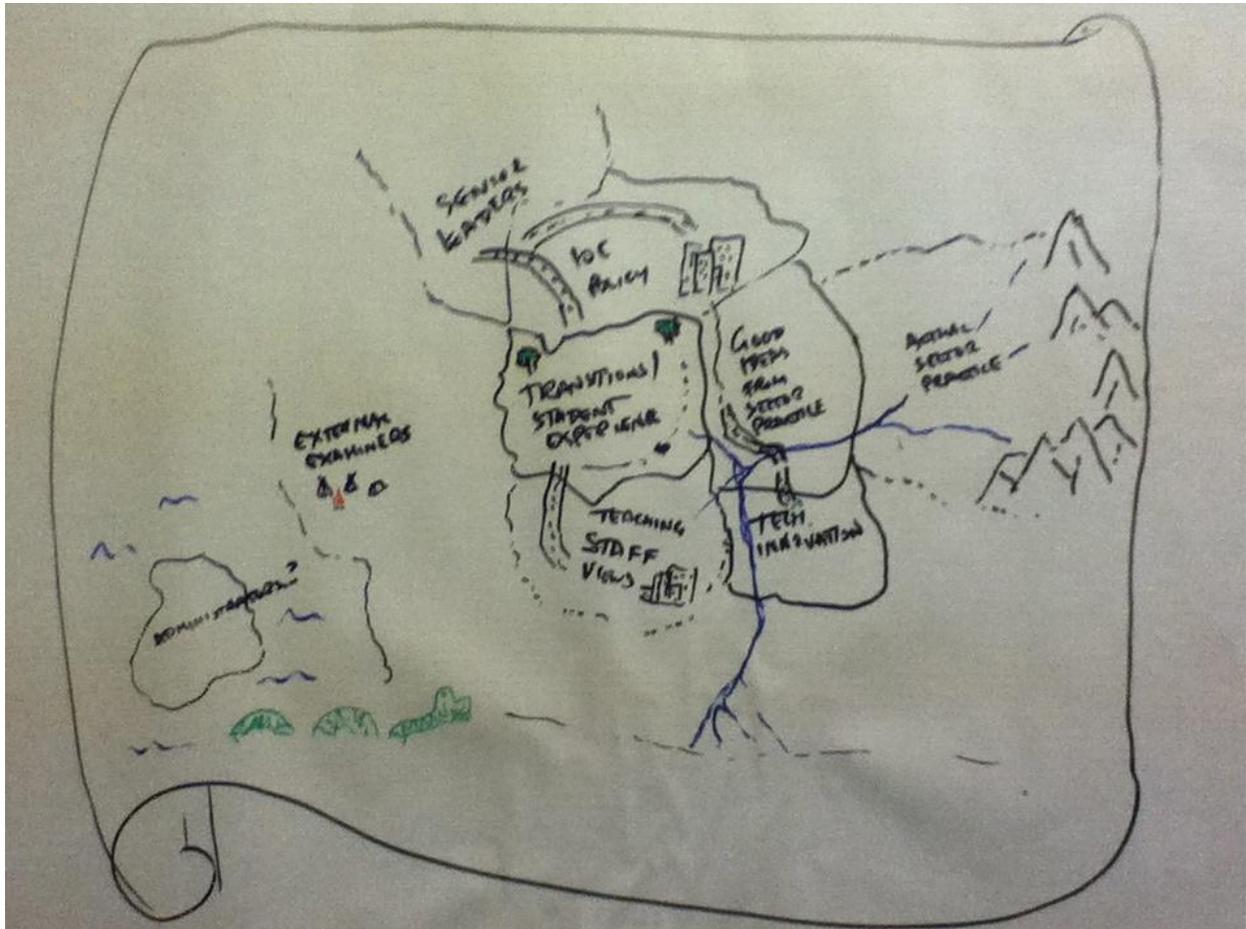
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### Appendix 1 Rich picture of IOE assessment and feedback practice



### Appendix 2 Template for sector technology project analysis

Project title	URL or reference	Level UG or PG	Disciplines involved	Scale e.g. numbers of students, institutions, programmes	Improvement(s) to learning	Implications for organisational change e.g. can the idea be easily scaled up? Are there infrastructure or policy changes needed?	Technologies used and any implications for other projects	Other comments or unusual features e.g. any mention of cost effectiveness?

### Appendix 3 Template for IOE analysis

Student descriptions of assessment practice / Frontline staff descriptions of assessment practice (please select)

Assessment processes	Source of evidence	Programmes involved	Range of practices and the impact on learning and motivation	Examples/statistics/quotes
Peer feedback				
Requirement				

IOE Baseline Report

s for submission of drafts				
Feedback on drafts				
Timing of feedback on drafts				
Feed forward for other assignments				
Grading				
Timing of feedback on final assignment				
Self assessment				
Use of technology in assessment				