University of Salford
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# ILIA

## Innovative Learning in Action

### Issue Six: Innovative Practice in Assessment

Autumn/Winter 2006


Education Development Unit

# Introduction

Dear Colleagues

Welcome to this, the sixth edition of Innovative Learning in Action (ILIA) which focuses our attention on the theme of innovative practice in assessment. On the face of it, innovative assessment may be regarded as any form of assessment which involves the application of a new technique, method or tool. However, to quote Graham Mohl (2007):

'Innovative assessment is not just some trendy new technique dreamt-up purely to save on the amount of time teachers spend on marking, it is a genuine attempt to improve quality of learning in higher education. If we do save time in the process then all the better for our own learning.'

*http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/mowl_index.html*

The range of work in this edition of ILIA demonstrates how colleagues are readily embracing this fundamental principle. These papers and snapshots show us how contributors are actively exploring, reviewing and modifying their practice to address assessment principles and strategies helping to produce active learners who are reasoning, critical, highly motivated, capable of self-evaluation and equipped with transferable skills to enable them to flourish in the 21st century global economy.

Whilst covering diverse and extensive territory both conceptually and practically, in their entirety these works share common ground in embracing the notion of 'the redistribution of educational power' (Heron, 1981).

Assessment therefore becomes something which is not simply 'done to' students, but it is also 'done by' and 'done with' students (Harris and Bell, 1990) and is as much about enhancing the quality of their learning as it is about measuring their performance. Some of these works may challenge traditional positions and approaches and in so doing I hope they will provide you with a stimulating and thought-provoking opportunity to reflect on practice and student learning.

Mohl, G. (2007) Innovative Assessment available at:

*http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/mowl_index.html*

accessed 100707

Harris, D. and Bell, C (1990) Evaluating and Assessing for Learning as cited in Mohl, G. (2007)

Heron, J. (1981) Assessment revisited in Boud, D. (ed) Developing Student Autonomy in Learning as cited in Mohl, G. (2007)

Dorothy Oakey

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# Notes for Contributors

## Submission details (for papers and 'snapshots')

We will be pleased to receive papers, case studies and 'snapshots' which demonstrate innovation in learning and teaching at the University of Salford. Potential contributors new to writing might find the following article 'Writing Academic Papers: the *Clinical Effectiveness in Nursing* experience' useful:

http://www.harcourt-international.com/journals/suppfile/flat/cein-writing.pdf

## Length

*Papers and case studies* should be a maximum of 3,500-4,000 words without references.

*'Snapshots'* should be a maximum of 600 words without references.

For both papers and 'Snapshots' authors should include a full word count, (preferably with and without references) with submission.

## Page size

All submissions should be left-right justified on an A4 page with 3.5cm margin on the left and 2.54 margins at the top, bottom and on the right

## Text formatting

*Normal text:* 11 point Arial font

*Title and Authors:*

*Title:* Arial 14 point bold centred across the full width of the page

*Author(s) name(s):* Arial 12 point non-bold. We also recommend you add your e-mail address using the standard house style.

*Sections:* headings in Arial 12 point bold with only the initial letters of significant words capitalised (Note: determiners such as 'the' 'or' 'a' are not capitalised unless they are the first word of the heading).

*Subsections:* headings in Arial 11 point bold (Note: determiners such as 'the' 'or' 'a' are not capitalised unless they are the first word of the heading).

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*Page numbers, headers and footers, footnotes*

DO NOT include page numbers and headers/footers in your submission. These will be added when the publication is assembled. Footnotes should be in Arial 8 point.

## Abstract

*Papers and case studies:* an abstract of a maximum of 200 words summarising the context should be included.

*'Snapshots'* do not require an Abstract.

## Figures

Figures or tables should be inserted at the appropriate point in your text and have a figure caption in normal Arial 11 point font, at the bottom and left justified.

## Quotations

Use single quotation marks throughout unless quoting within a quotation. Substantive quotes should be indented with no quotation marks.

## Keywords

Include three or four key words to increase the likelihood of potential readers searching the literature accessing your article.

## Language, style and content

Please make sure that your paper is in clear, readable and proper English. Please make consistent use of British dialect of English. Please write for a cross-disciplinary and international audience.

- Write in a straightforward style. Use simple sentence structure. Try to avoid long sentences and complex sentence structure
- Use common and basic vocabulary and avoid jargon
- Briefly explain or define all technical terms
- Explain all acronyms the first time they are used in your text
- Be careful not to use gender specific pronouns (he, she) and other gendered words or phrases ('chairman', 'manpower', 'the man in the street') where reference to both sexes is intended. Use language that is gender neutral ('chairperson', 'workforce', 'people in general').
  For further advice and examples regarding gender and other personal attributes please visit the British Sociological Association website (http://www.britsoc.org.uk)

## Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements should be included under a separate heading before the references at the end of the paper.
For example,

We thank Dr. Joe Bloggs and Prof. Joanne Bloggs of the University of Salford for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. This project was made possible by funding from the University of Salford TLQIS.

## References and Citations

Within the text, references should be indicated using (author, year). If several papers by the same author and from the same year are cited, a, b, c, etc. should be put after the year of publication.

If the reference is to a piece by two authors, both should be cited, for example (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000). If there are more than two authors, et al should be used. The full list of authors should appear under References at the end of the paper.

The references should be listed in full at the end of the paper in the following standard form:

*For Books:* Barnett, R. (1992) *Improving Higher Education: Total Quality Care* (Buckingham, SRHE & OU)

*For Articles:* Reynolds, M. and Trehan, K. (2000) Assessment: a critical perspective, *Studies in Higher Education,* 25, pp.267-278

*For Chapters:* Walker, R. (1987) Techniques for Research, in: R.Murphy & H.Torrance (Eds) *Evaluating Education: Issues and Methods*

*For Websites:*
http://www.shef.ac.uk/alt/call/research.htm ALT-C 2003 *Research Paper Format Template*

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http://www.harcourt-international.com/journals/nepr/

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# Assessment Strategies in the Multicultural Classroom

(Extract from the Higher Education Academy commissioned report 'The Internationalisation of UK Higher Education: a review of selected material')

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## Context: rationale, aims and methodology

'The Internationalisation of UK Higher Education: a review of selected material' was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in March 2006. It developed from the HEA Internationalisation Forum on 5th December 2005, one outcome of which was the recognition that further research into the area was required. To usefully build on existing work and support emerging policy and practice a bibliographic search and literature review was a necessary first step. Viv Caruana and Nicola Spurling in the Education Development Unit at the University of Salford were commissioned to conduct this work.

Reflecting the themes of the Forum and priority areas for the HEA the Review addressed two aspects of internationalisation in UK HE, namely internationalisation of the curriculum and the experiences of international students in UK universities.

The following questions provided a focus for the Review:

- What working definitions of internationalisation of higher education are in currency?
- What meanings are attributed to internationalisation of the curriculum?
- What models for institutional internationalisation are emerging?
- What curriculum models are emerging/being adopted?
- What is the literature telling us about the experience of international students in the UK (to include strategies for their recruitment, retention and optimal learning outcomes)?
- What is the literature telling us about the relations between international students and UK domiciled students?

The review focused on the published and the 'grey' literature (although resource constraints meant that books and book chapters had to be excluded). The approach was also informed by the reviewers' tacit knowledge that much of the useful and ground setting work in this area was available as conference proceedings, or on university websites, as well as in journals. The literature search therefore encompassed all sources where full text documents could be easily retrieved in the time available, and that could in turn, be easily retrieved by the audience of the Project Report. The global literature search identified in excess of 400 relevant sources which were entered into an Endnote bibliographical database and analysed by year of publication, country of origin etc. to provide an overview of trends. This overview was complemented by detailed thematic analysis of 163 sources of UK origin in order to identify key messages and gaps in the literature.

## The multicultural context

In addressing 'what curriculum models are emerging/being adopted?' The review identified an array of sources exploring and interrogating classroom interventions which taken together were deemed representative of genuine attempts on the part of educators to find ways of engaging with the different pedagogical backgrounds and expectations that are encountered in the multi-cultural classroom. It was concluded that although much of the literature still has a tendency towards, at least, the language of 'deficit' and 'assimilation' there is evidence of an approach to teaching and learning that aspires towards 'cultural inclusion'. This contrasts with what Frame and O'Connor (2002) cited in Warren (2005) term 'assimilationist' attempts to 'manage diversity' via induction programmes and study skills courses.

Furthermore, the evidence provided in the review suggested that in engaging with 'Internationalising the Curriculum' lecturers and programme teams are exploring the nature of the 'expectations gap' challenging the discourse of 'deficit model' and 'assimilation' through dialogue and within their own work. It was clear that lecturers are seeking to understand how culture influences learning styles and processes, in order that such understanding should inform and shape the learning experiences which they design for multicultural settings (Hills and Thom, 2004; De Vita, 2001). Researchers are also engaging students in a dialogue about their expectations of, the UK HE system in general, and specific issues. These include: psychological and socio-cultural adjustment, the influence of Confucian as opposed to Socratic heritage on learning, the most valued attributes of teachers, expectations of group work etc. (De Vita, 2000; Hills and Thom, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Kingston and Forland, 2004; Nield and Thom 2006; Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006; Peters, 2005).

Within this broad framework there is a burgeoning literature concerned with the multicultural classroom which addresses a whole range of learning, teaching and assessment issues, based on the empirical study of specific interventions.
However, the review also posited that whilst signalling positive re-alignment of teaching practice, it may be the case that 'assimilation' or rather 'socialisation' into the UK HE system has simply shifted location. Rather than an add-on separate from the mainstream curriculum, it is now being embedded in the learning and teaching practice that characterises, at least some, of the learning spaces of UK universities. In looking to the future the reviewers concluded that whilst aspiring to the ideal of 'cultural inclusivity' there is a continuing need for dialogue and debate to address the tensions of cultural conflict between the Confucian and Socratic models of learning and to consider the influence of the Western social and cultural environment.

## Assessment Strategies in the Multi-cultural Classroom: what the UK HE literature has to say

The literature addressing assessment strategies in the multicultural classroom was analysed under five themes – assuming prior experience, the importance of dialogue, avoiding cultural bias, countering plagiarism and finally, fostering

achievement and 'levelling the playing field'. These themes emerged from the literature itself.

## Assuming prior experience

In the internationalisation literature a number of sources explore a range of assessment issues within the multi-cultural context. These include possible points of confusion regarding assessment, plagiarism and cultural bias in assessment - all of which at least in part, stem from practitioners' almost 'taken for granted' approach to UK academic culture in multicultural settings (Barrett and Malcolm, 2006; De Vita, 2002, 2004; Hills and Thom, 2005; Ridley, 2004). Hills and Thom (2005) make a moot point regarding how we as teachers often assume prior experience, particularly in assessment. The teaching team involved in this intervention are described very aptly as '…in effect trying to teach the finer points of bowling googlies to people who had not played cricket…' particularly when dealing with coursework, presentations and forms of group assessment.

## Good practice in assessment – the importance of dialogue

A number of useful suggestions to consider when designing the internationalised curriculum and developing supporting materials, emerge from this literature:

- Module/programme handbooks which specify assignment briefs and highlight the need to develop persuasive arguments in assignments are insufficient to close the 'culture gap'. Students need to be engaged in a dialogue that encourages them to consider UK culture in comparison with their own experience. Closing the gap may be difficult if the curriculum design does not suggest that students views are welcomed and respected for the diversity that they bring to the learning experience. In this sense, assessment strategies need to include some space for collaboration and negotiation between tutors and students and collaboration between peers (Hills and Thom, 2005; Ridley, 2004).
- Guidance 'on task' is crucial. The analysis of assignment titles is a potential moment of anxiety for students and they need to be proactively engaged in constructing their own interpretations. Small group brainstorming sessions are seen to be useful in addition to other strategies that encourage students to explain key terms in the task specification and any they might introduce themselves (Hills and Thom, 2005; Ridley, 2004).
- Space for conversation is also necessary to overcome confusion around when and how to reveal 'one's own voice'. Often there is an underlying assumption that to write in the first person is not appropriate in academic work, so special attention needs to be paid to explanation particularly when tasks involve self-evaluation and reflection in the first person (Ridley, 2004).

## Good practice in assessment – avoiding cultural bias

Cultural bias in some assessment methods may disadvantage particular groups of students. Whilst many international students may be familiar with unseen end of session timed-examinations, they can present quite a daunting prospect and it is argued that for example, critical essays on selected readings related to examination topics but not formally assessed, can be useful revision tools (De Vita, 2004; Ridley, 2004). Preliminary findings of empirical research addressing the possibility of cultural bias in end of course exams, multiple-choice tests and coursework assignments suggest that end of course exams disadvantage students operating in a second language through 'intellectual self-censorship'. If a complex idea cannot readily be expressed in the second language it will not appear. It is therefore recommended that the exclusive use of the timed examination should be avoided in culturally mixed classrooms. The empirical research also indicated that there are similar issues of timing with multiple-choice questions, but also more fundamental cultural issues. The premise of 'only one right answer' goes against the spirit of the multicultural curriculum that 'gives voice to unconventional or silenced perspectives, valuing a variety of views that constitute truth and knowledge' and risk-taking behaviour and tolerance for ambiguity are central concepts within the cross-cultural domain (De Vita, 2002).

## Good practice in assessment – countering plagiarism

Rates of detected plagiarism in assignments can be reduced by providing a comprehensive explanation of referencing in course documentation, refocusing notions of plagiarism to emphasise the positive, rather than the negative, in explaining why educators value appropriate citation. This can be supplemented by explanations of what cheating is, why it is wrong, what the penalties are and how to avoid it. The message however, needs to be articulated early on and it may be useful to involve international student support staff at the point of induction, the message then needs to be reinforced throughout the teaching and learning experience, particularly when discussing assignments (Hills and Thom, 2005).

Barrett and Malcolm's (2006) work is particularly interesting for their use of plagiarism detection tools to help students understand good academic practice when using source material. What is innovative is the shift of emphasis away from detection towards student education. Guidance on task was given prior to submission of assignments which were processed through 'Turnitin' and 'Ferret'. The reports produced by the software formed the basis of individual feedback to students who were then given the opportunity of a second submission. The research concludes that it is not enough to simply 'tell' students about collusion and plagiarism, because such concepts have little meaning without relevance, and using students' work to engage with the concepts provides that relevance to enable students to develop appropriate skills. Another striking finding of this research is that students from undergraduate study in China were far less likely to plagiarise than those who did their undergraduate study in the UK, a result which may fundamentally challenge cultural explanations of plagiarism (Barrett and Malcolm, 2006).

## Fostering achievement and 'levelling the playing field'

In the area of what is probably best termed 'achievement' De Vita (2005) is notable in focusing on progression, the 'dynamic construct of achievement' to investigate the learning achievements of home and international students.
This approach contrasts with the more common approach which relies heavily on final achievement, as characterised by for example, Morrison et al (2005), which used multi-level modelling to simultaneously evaluate the relative impact of country of domicile, subject, sex and age, mode of study and highest qualification on entry on the single outcome of degree classification.
This research concluded that highest qualification on entry and mode of study are significantly associated with final performance, but perhaps the central issue is what does this tell us about the kinds of interventions and support that can 'level the playing field'? De Vita's (2005) work is important in revealing that - perhaps contrary to the received wisdom that international students 'underperform' in their first year of study - the greatest difficulty occurs in the transition from years one to two, with recovery of performance in year three. In explaining these results it is suggested that rather than considerations of English language competence and cultural adjustment the significant factor could be the 'raising of the bar' at level two, with less differentiation between levels two and three that accounts for differences in performance. In this respect, the range of assessment methods deployed at different levels, the introductory nature of modules at level one etc. may be factors to consider. Findings of the statistical analysis of progression data were corroborated by empirical evidence from students suggesting that there might be a need for greater emphasis on the transition from level one to level two with targeted support focusing on formative assessment feedback linked to students' personal development plans (PDPs) (De Vita, 2005).

## Conclusions

'The Internationalisation of UK Higher Education: a review of selected material' is wide-ranging both in its conception and execution. Nonetheless, in the multicultural context it reveals a high level of activity at the 'chalk-face'. Ball (1994) as cited in Keeling (2004) suggests '…the translation of the crude, abstract simplicity of policy texts into interactive and sustainable practices of some sort involves productive thought, invention and adaptation…' and the review suggests that lecturers are investing productive thought, are being inventive and are adapting to the challenge of assessment in the multicultural classroom. The works cited in this paper provide elements of good practice whilst exploring issues and are useful in countering the phenomenon highlighted by Keeling (2004), that much of the literature is unlikely to illuminate the extent to which 'loudly trumpeted schemes' lead to actual change in educational practice, as opposed to a 're-labelling and re-packaging of existing practices'.

However, in looking to future research the literature review also highlighted a continuing pre-occupation with the 'international student experience' in the multi-cultural context, with relatively little evidence of research into the home students' perception of multicultural engagement and assessment (the work of De Vita (2002b) representing the 'exception to the rule'). It was also concluded that the literature provides little evidence of any bridging of the divide between the international student experience, popularly viewed as a concern for support staff and the internationalised curriculum, more frequently regarded as the territory of the academic. Yet this is probably the greatest challenge to teaching, learning and assessment in the multicultural context.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is based on a literature review commissioned by the Higher Education Academy

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# Self-assessment Skill and Student Experience

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## Abstract
The study sought to establish the level of students' self-assessment skill—particularly inexperienced students—by asking students to evaluate and provide estimated marks for their own work. Comparisons of student estimated and tutor marks indicated a good level of self-assessment skill in the majority of students. A significant minority of students did however fail to exhibit such skills. There was also some evidence of a tendency for students to underestimate their performance. Findings suggest that while self-assessment skill undoubtedly develops, becoming more effective during students' academic career, inexperienced students do have the capacity for self-evaluation and should therefore be included in self-assessment activities. In light of findings and the heterogeneous nature of student groups, student monitoring and skill development are proposed in order to allow the integration of self-assessment into the learning and assessment process.

## Introduction
The context of education is continuously changing at all levels, with ever increasing expectations and demands placed on both students and staff by those concerned with educational processes and outcomes. There are many factors responsible for the changing context, some of which are common across all levels of education and some which are peculiar to only some levels. In higher education the focus in recent times has been on issues relating to widening participation and student employability (Cassidy & Weinberg, 2005). As a consequence, higher education as a whole is not only servicing record numbers of students (Universities & Colleges Admissions Service UK, 2003), but is required to make explicit the teaching of employability skills. These include a broad range of skills or competencies which are not limited to subject specialisms (technical skills) but are transferable (non-technical skills) (Boud, Coben & Sampson, 2001). It is likely that only in some cases are these skills already implicit in teaching programmes.

Higher education is responding valiantly to increased demands, utilising virtual learning environments (VLE) to enhance flexibility for learning and delivery and to support personal development planning (PDP) logging skills in such a way as to make them immediately transparent to prospective employers. Both VLE and PDP are examples of good pedagogical practice in response to changing needs. However, the effectiveness of each of these practices is dependent on one key factor – independent learning - which is both the ultimate outcome of higher education and is a high priority expectation of graduate employers (Cotton, 2001).

The need for students to develop as independent learners is both fundamental to academic success in higher education and essential to subsequent professional success. One defining characteristic of independent learners is their ability to self-assess. This involves a high level of self-awareness and the ability to monitor one's own learning and performance. Self-assessment skills, in an academic setting, develop partly as a function of critical feedback from tutors. However, one consequence of large student numbers and related assessment workload for tutors is a fall in the levels of formative feedback and feedback per se provided by tutors. This raises concerns regarding the adequate development of students' self-assessment skills in higher education.

The [potential] consequential effect of less tutor feedback on the development of self-assessment skills in students provides the focus for the current study. The aim is to determine existing levels of self-assessment skill in relatively inexperienced undergraduate students so that the need for further development of these skills can be assessed. First year undergraduate students were asked to evaluate the academic standard of their own work submitted as part of the formal assessment profile of an undergraduate programme. The level of correspondence between student estimated mark and tutor assigned mark (i.e. accuracy) was used as an index of student self-assessment skill.

## The self-assessment paradigm

### Defining self-assessment skills
What defines self-assessment for students is the acceptance of responsibility for their own learning and performance. Before students will—or can be expected to do this—they must be offered the opportunity to develop self-assessment skills and be made aware of the value and effectiveness of these skills.
The introduction of planned and structured self assessment activities allows for the development of skills associated with self assessment capabilities. While these activities may well focus on the delivery of content, the aim should be to develop skills which contribute to the students' ability to judge their own progress and performance. According to Hendry (1996) tutors are empowering students involving them in self-assessment activities which provide the opportunity to develop metacognitive and more general learning skills.

### The value of self-assessment
Struyven, Dochy & Janssens (2002) refer to a current 'assessment culture' which favours integration of assessment, teaching and learning, involvement of students as active and informed participants and a focus on the process as well as the products of learning. Self-assessment, conducted in its complete form, along with related activities such as peer assessment, conforms to and propagates such a culture of student-centred—as opposed to teacher-centred—learning. Students are actively involved in devising criteria for assessment, applying these criteria and making judgements about the outcome of their learning. This provides students with a unique insight into assessment procedures and tutor expectations, allowing for the development of analytic and evaluative skills as well as a cultivating sense of responsibility and student autonomy. In a summary of the pedagogical benefits of self- assessment, Peckham and Sutherland (2000) include: providing students with the opportunity of ownership of assessment criteria; an opportunity to take responsibility for learning; encourages self-motivation and independence in learning; empowers students through valuing their judgement; and encourages

students to reflect critically on their own work. McAlpine (2000) adds the benefits of encouraging success, life long learning and a collaborative tutor-student relationship for teaching and learning. van Krayenoord & Paris (1997) value self-assessment to the extent that they believe it to be fundamental to the development of intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning.

## Self-assessment as a developmental process

The empirical findings of self-assessment studies examining differences between students' self-evaluation marks and tutor marks have been examined in detail by both David Boud and Nancy Falchikov in a series of critical reviews and meta-analyses (Falchikov, 1986, Boud & Falchikov, 1989, Falchikov & Boud, 1989). Review findings reveal: an effect for student experience, where more experienced students were able to provide more accurate evaluations of their work—although Falchikov & Boud (1989) consider the possibility that this is more likely an effect of expertise rather than simply length of enrolment—; a tendency for experienced students to underestimate their mark—a similar effect is reported in relation to ability, where more able students underestimate and less able students overestimate their performance (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 1997)—; an ability effect, where those students judged as more able academically were also more able to self-assess with more accuracy; and a course level effect, with students from advanced courses self-assessing with more accuracy than students from introductory courses. In general terms then, these findings support the contention that there is a strong developmental component present in self-assessment skill which is closely associated with academic progression.

## Barriers to self-assessment

Whilst there seems to be evidence for an overwhelming case for its use as an aid to both learning and assessment, self-assessment, like peer assessment, still eludes full integration into higher education. Tutors continued reluctance to fully implement self-assessment may relate to an awareness of the potential for student resistance as well as to issues of subjectivity and reliability of self-assessed marks. Savin-Baden (2003) does point to subjectivity as a potential problem of self-assessment, with students exhibiting a tendency to judge what they 'meant rather than what they actually achieved'.

Significantly, Gibbs (1995) believes that students entering higher education do not possess the appropriate skills to allow accurate or reliable self-assessment and need to be given the opportunity to develop and practise skills associated with self-assessment. Exploring the accuracy of inexperienced students' self-evaluation of their own work will provide further insight into the issues of subjectivity, reliability and accuracy of students' self-assessment skills as they enter higher education.

## Aim and methodology

In the light of Gibbs' (1995) assertion this study aims to assess at what level students entering higher education (i.e. 'inexperienced' students) are capable of self-assessing. In establishing the degree to which inexperienced students are able to self-evaluate and make judgements about the standard of their own work, the study considers implications for teaching and learning practice and strategy in higher education.

A 'between subjects' design was employed to compare student-estimated marks with tutor marks for year one undergraduate introductory module coursework assignments. Both student-estimated and tutor marks used a standard percentage range of 0-100%. Firstly, a suitable module which would provide a vehicle for the study was identified. The selected module was a first year, first semester introductory core module. The module was selected on the bases that it was a core—rather than optional—module where student numbers were high to ensure an adequate sample; it was a module in which the researcher had no involvement in student assessment; and the assessment format was clearly structured with explicit assessment criteria (felt to be important given that students had not been involved in developing or defining the assessment criteria, which Boud (1995) suggests as part of the self-assessment process). Given the module chosen the total participant sample was 160 the mean age of the sample was 21.1 years (SD 5.03, range 18-41 years). The sample consisted of 41 males (mean age 22.42 yrs, SD 5.8, range 18-39yrs) and 117 females (mean age 20.6yrs, SD 4.6, range 18-41yrs). Gender for two participants was not recorded. The sample is considered to be a fair representation of university student populations world wide, with an increasing trend for female students to outnumber male students (Ballantyne, 2000).

Students were briefed regarding the purpose of the study and the right not to participate was made explicit. Students were told that they would be asked to provide a confidential estimate of their assignment mark but it was made clear that any data gained from the study would be entirely unrelated to assessment of the module, that the researcher would not be involved in the assessment process and that data would not be made available to anyone involved in the assessment process. Students were then given full contact details of the researcher (including email address) and asked to provide an estimated mark (out of 100%) for their assessed coursework once they had completed and submitted the work. Students were given the option of posting or emailing their estimates to the researcher. Both verbal and email reminders for estimates were given to students just prior and just after the assignment submission deadline. Tutors' marks were collated using module records and included first submission marks which had undergone the normal moderation procedure.

## Analysis and results

Self-assessment skill was represented as an index of accuracy of student estimated marks constructed by subtracting tutor mark from student-estimated mark for each student, so that greater self-assessment skill was represented by smaller absolute differences between the two marks. Comparative and correlation analyses were performed between student-estimated and tutor mark to establish the accuracy or level of student self-assessment skill.

Table 1.Mean student-estimated and tutor assignment mark

| | Student-estimated mark | Tutor mark |
|---|---|---|
| **Mean %** | 53.4% | 54.8% |
| **SD** | 9.5 | 10.7 |
| **N** | 90 | 118 |

Table1 shows a mean difference of 1.4 between student-estimated and actual tutor mark. The difference between student and tutor marks was not found to be significant (t=-0.93, df 206, 2-tailed, p>0.05). Tutor and student-estimated marks were also found to be significantly positively correlated (r=0.252, n=82, 2-tailed, p<0.025).

When an accuracy index was calculated to reflect the difference between tutor and student-estimated mark—by subtracting actual mark from estimated mark—poorer accuracy was found to be positively correlated with estimated mark (r=0.486, n=82, 2-tailed, p<0.001) and negatively correlated with actual mark (r=-0.723, n=82, 2-tailed, p<0.001). So that the higher the student estimated their mark to be, the less accurate was the estimate, and the higher the student's actual mark the greater was their degree of estimate accuracy.

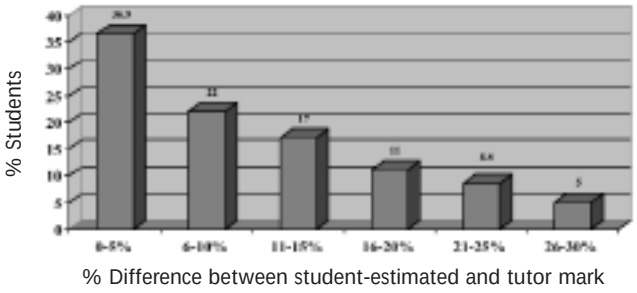


Figure 1. Accuracy of student-estimated assignment mark

Figure 1 illustrates the degree of accuracy with which students estimated their actual assignment mark, with 58.5% of students making estimates within 10% of the tutor's mark. A quarter of students did however provide estimates which were more than 15% above or below the tutor's actual mark.

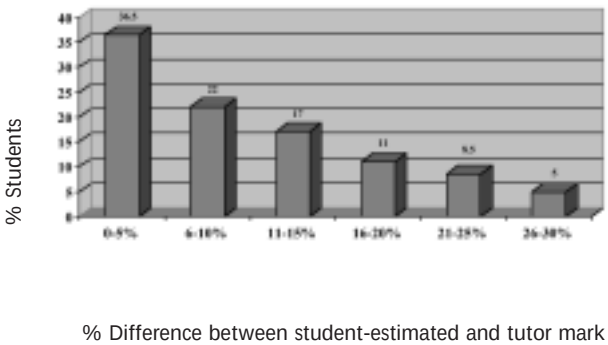


Figure 2. Percentage of students over and under estimating assignment marks

Figure 2 shows that the majority of students (56%) underestimated their assignment mark compared with 40% of students who overestimated their mark.

## Discussion

### Student experience and self-assessment skill

The principal aim of the study was to establish the level of self-assessment skill in comparatively inexperienced undergraduate students. Asking students to provide an estimated mark for completed coursework and comparing this to the actual mark awarded by the course tutor provided a measure of student self-assessment skill. An overall comparison between tutor and student marks in the current study produced only a small and statistically non-significant difference, suggesting high levels of competency in self-assessment skill among first year undergraduates (see table 1). Whilst some correspondence between student estimated and tutor marks was anticipated, both the degree of accuracy and the relative inexperience of the student sample are particularly notable—although not unique. In fact, Boud and Falchikov (1989) report some examples of effect sizes of zero in their meta-analysis of student and tutor marks indicating indistinguishable differences between student and tutor marks, with at least some of the studies reviewed having used inexperienced students.

The finding that even inexperienced students are competent self-assessors is contrary to Gibbs' (1995) suggestion that students do not enter higher education possessing reliable self-assessment skills. The issue of defining and operationalising student experience is however problematic. Whilst it may be possible to categorise students according to experience, it is the precise nature of the experience which will determine its relative importance to the development of self-assessment skill in the student. Students who took part in the current study were deemed inexperienced on the basis that they were first year undergraduates in their first semester of study in higher education. That they (as a group) exhibited a good level of self-assessment skill may be testament to a changing trend in pre-university education that exposes students to teaching practices which involve students in making judgements about their own learning and performance (Boud & Falchikov, 1989). Teaching practice may also encourage independence and metacognitive skills (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994) thus assisting the development of self-assessment competency. An alternative explanation is that the nature of the assessment employed in the study allowed students to make use of explicit and specific assessment criteria to guide the self-assessment of their work. Peckham and Sutherland (2000) have reported that while guidance on how to provide a realistic estimate of test marks based on effort and deservedness was relatively ineffective, self-assessment using model answers proved very effective in eliciting accurate estimates. The point which needs to be made here is that whilst experience is undoubtedly key to the development of self-assessment skill, many 'inexperienced' students may possess enough of the 'right' experience to allow for the non-tokenistic

introduction and integration of self-assessment from an early stage in the higher education process.

Falchikov and Boud (1989) discriminate between absolute and relative measures of self-assessment skill, with absolute measures indicating the student's ability to assess their own level of performance—achieved by subtracting tutor's actual mark from student's estimated mark as above—and relative measures indicating the student's ability to judge their performance relative to the rest of the student group, and recommend that both measures are reported. Only a small to moderate correlation between student estimates and tutor marks is reported here, demonstrating what Falchikov and Boud (1989) term students' 'self knowledge relative the rest of the group' (p. 426). The less convincing results according to a relative measure of self-assessment skill are in line with Falchikov and Boud's (1989) comments that achieving accurate relative assessment is more difficult for students than achieving accurate absolute assessment. It may be that a clearer distinction between the two skills has been exposed here because of the relative inexperience of the student sample used in the study.

A more detailed analysis of student estimates using an accuracy index of self-assessment skill revealed that whilst the majority of students (58.5%) provided estimates within 10% of their actual [tutor's] mark, a quarter of students provided estimates of between 16% and 30% outside their actual mark (see figure. 1). Clearly any student group will be characterised by a variation in aptitudes, experience, ability and skills and, as self-assessment is commonly viewed as an acquired skill, it would be unrealistic to expect a uniform profile of self-assessment competency across any group, not least a large group of new intake students recruited under a Widening Participation policy. It is not possible here to account for precisely what factors are responsible for the under-development of self-assessment competency in those students who provided inaccurate estimates, although in many cases it is likely due—in part at least—to a lack of opportunity to practise and develop self-assessment skills and receive related guidance and feedback. The challenge for higher education is to provide a learning and teaching framework—likely based on a student-centred approach— which is capable of providing appropriate opportunities for development of self-assessment skills for diverse student groups. It is suggested that one key area for research development would be the gathering of detailed empirical evidence which may cast light on those characteristics and factors which could account for individual differences in student self-assessment skill.

## Student ability and self-assessment skill

In their review Boud and Falchikov (1989) specifically address two major questions relating to self-assessment: whether there is a tendency for students to over or under rate their marks compared with tutor ratings; and whether student ability is related to self-assessment skill. Although they found examples of both under and over estimation, they conclude that there is no consistent pattern of either under or overestimation of marks by students. Their results relating to student ability were more consistent, indicating that the more able students were inclined to self-assess more accurately and to under rate their performance, while weaker students tended to be more optimistic and over rate their work.

Results of the current study do in fact show a tendency for students to underestimate their mark, with 56% of students underestimating compared with 40% who overestimated their mark (see figure 2). In addition, higher student estimated marks were associated with poorer levels of self-assessment accuracy. Although Boud and Falchikov (1989) were unable to fully explain their findings they did point to the existence of more methodological flaws in the overrating studies; that all studies involving medical students resulted in underrating; and that different circumstances lead to differing trends towards under and overrating. Considering these comments in light of the current findings, it may be possible to conclude that underrating is the more reliable trend and that ability is a key factor determining whether students over or underrate given that all studies involving medical students—who can generally be considered able students - involved underrating of marks. The correlation reported between estimated mark and accuracy may also reflect the tendency for optimism in weaker students (Boud & Falchikov, 1989).

Findings here relating to ability revealed that greater levels of self-assessment accuracy (reflected in smaller accuracy index scores) were associated with students who were awarded higher tutor marks, so the more academically capable students (according to tutor marks) also had better developed self-assessment skills. Boud and Falchokiv (1989) identified student ability as a principal factor in determining self-assessment skill, with more able students self-assessing with more accuracy than less able students. Such a finding—linking self-assessment skill with intellectual capacity—may be unsurprising if we accept a definition of self-assessment skill which includes an emphasis on metacognitive thinking, self-reflective thinking, goal-directed learning and critical self-evaluation of performance (McAlpine, 2000). However, the many-sided nature of self-assessment is much broader than purely intellectual capacity and involves a number of separate skills and intelligences (including metacognition) which can develop often as a result learning something else, i.e. incidental learning (Vockell, 2004) or with training and experience (McDonald & Boud, 2003). It is possible to argue that students completing work at a higher standard can be said to have been involved in more effective learning, thus resulting in further developed self-assessment skills.

## Conclusion

It is suggested that findings from the current study demonstrate the relevance and appropriateness of self-assessment for students at the beginning of their career in higher education. As such, it is crucial to provide students with structured and closely guided—given the range of students ability to cope with the demands of self-assessment—opportunities for self-assessment as early as possible in their HE careers ensuring that they are aware of and value their existing capability for self-evaluation and its potential for development and application. Continuing with the current go-slow and ad hoc approach to self-assessment undermines

both the extensive body of work on the subject and the potential benefits, not just in terms of assessment, but for learning in general and for learning through assessment. Whilst acknowledging the need for assessment for certification, Boud (2000) emphasises the value of assessment for learning. In proposing his concept of sustainable assessment—which encompasses self-assessment— Boud (2000) highlights the need for the acquisition of assessment skills which support lifelong learning and that to become effective lifelong learners, students must also become lifelong assessors.

> "I work to get them in the habit of self-assessing but they have a lot of educational history invested in external assessment. Students don't know why it's good or they think it's only good if the teacher says it's good. It's hard to break that mindset . . . I think students can self-assess and should self-assess." (Knowles, 2004).

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# Inclusive Assessment for Ethnic Diversity and Disability: challenging 'low expectations' and making 'SPACE'

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## Introduction

The University of Salford is committed to and has been nationally recognised for its achievements in promoting widening participation, thus attracting an increasingly diverse body of students to the institution: 8.7% of its undergraduate students entered via Access routes (the highest level in the country) according to HESA statistics in 2004/05; and Salford was recognised in the 2007 HEIST awards for its Young People's University initiative. However, Leathwood (2006) notes that "whilst the main emphasis of widening participation policy and initiatives has been on getting students into HE, the question 'access to what?' has increasingly been asked." This means we must turn our attention to assessing how inclusive our programmes of study are – and, essentially, carry out an equality impact assessment of the learning environment. Bolt (2004) suggests that "the reality of inclusive higher education is multi-dimensional" and assessment is one of those dimensions as well as being a key element in setting and maintaining academic standards.

## Transforming teaching and learning

De Vita (2003) notes that "an increasingly diverse student population brings with it new and demanding challenges, as extant pedagogical models strain to deal with attitudes, needs and expectations that have, heretofore, never been encountered". In fact, many commentators writing about inclusivity in higher education highlight the need for universities to think differently about their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, moving away from the traditional methods of delivery and assessment where we seek to mould students to a particular way of learning and expression to a more flexible model which is sensitive to different cultures and learning preferences. "Non-traditional" students are often seen in terms of a "problem" that needs "solving", and Ryan (2000:5) suggests that "instead of expecting all students to fit into pre-existing structures, universities need to change the way that they respond to diverse student populations".

## Ethnic diversity

Bird (1996) considers that "issues of ethnic diversity have important consequences for the design, content, delivery and assessment of programmes and modules"; but Modood & Acland (1998) suggest that "of all developments by higher education institutions to improve the experience of black and minority ethnic (BME) students, transformation of the curriculum remains the area of least achievement." This is often because of a lack of confidence among UK academics (a group that remains predominantly white) about how to incorporate ethnic diversity into their teaching. Gordon (2007) reminds us that we all "have an obligation to educate ourselves about the world around us, about developments in our field, and most especially about people, events and ideas about which our class, race and/or social position would normally insulate us from knowing" to avoid the situation where BME students may feel their interests are being marginalized. Gordon suggests that "we do not just teach the contents of a discipline, but we teach what counts as worthy intellectual exploration by inclusion and by omission".

Retention goes hand in hand with the widening participation agenda, and Tinto (2003) notes that "students are more likely to persist when they find themselves in settings that hold high expectations for their learning, provide needed academic and social support, and actively involve them with other students and faculty in learning". Van Dyke (1998) also picks up on expectations, noting that if BME students believe that staff have lower expectations of them, they will find this demotivating, and will be unwilling to do their best as they feel that they are not going to obtain a mark that is commensurate with their efforts. This may become a vicious circle as their poorer performance serves to reinforce the stereotypes of lower expectations. Fair and non-discriminatory assessment methods and processes are a key area in the design of an inclusive learning environment to enhance the academic success of BME students. Van Dyke (1998) highlights a range of perceptions among black and minority ethnic students, for example, that a particular type of written and oral English plays an important part in the marks awarded, and that the criteria being applied to their work are discriminatory. She suggests that good marks in coursework among black and minority ethnic groups is often masked by poor exam performance (a form of assessment that is biased against those who lack preparation in exam techniques) and she recommends the use of a variety of assessment methods, an approach that is, of course, considered to be good general educational practice.

In a continuation of the theme of transforming the curriculum, Warren (2004) advocates the use of a "critical pedagogy", where the teacher "welcomes diverse perspectives without spotlighting individuals" and encourages "all students to reflect critically on their own cultural values and biases", allowing students to "negotiate assessment tasks pertinent to their own cultural backgrounds".

## Students with disabilities

Konur (2006) suggests that, for disabled students in higher education, "there are two separate, but inter-linked, access issues": equal access to education provision, or "programme access", and, once a student has achieved this, "curriculum access", where "reasonable adjustments" may be made to teaching and assessment strategies. Konur (2006) describes four types of curriculum adjustments, which will be familiar to most academics:

- presentation format - the form of curriculum delivery, which may be adjusted according to the learning preferences of individual students;
- response format - the format of the student's response, which may be in the same format as the adjustment to presentation;
- timing of access to the curriculum, for example, extended time for coursework and examinations;
- the setting in which examinations, lectures or work placements take place.

The SPACE (Staff-Student Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation) project on inclusive assessment in HE, coordinated by the University of Plymouth, draws on a range of literature and case studies from eight institutions based in the

South West of England (see http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/pages/view.asp?page=10494). The project report (2007) presents a useful conceptualisation of different assessment practices being used in HE to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The report suggests that across UK HE there are three approaches to the assessment of students with disabilities:

- the contingent approach, where special arrangements, such as extra time, amanuenses, separate rooms for exams, etc, are made in order to assimilate the students into the existing assessment system. The project team considers that such arrangements are compensatory and reflect the medical model of disability;

- the alternative approach, where a repertoire of different assessments for disabled students is built into a programme of study at the course design stage. The project team acknowledges that this approach can reflect and cater for individual learning preferences, but still considers the approach to be compensatory in nature because it emphasises the notion of disabled students as different;

- the inclusive approach, where a flexible range of assessment methods, designed to assess the same intended learning outcomes in different ways, is available to all students. This is consistent with the Open University's guidance on inclusive teaching, which advocates the principle of multiple means of expression, or providing (all) learners with alternative ways of demonstrating what they know.

The SPACE project team considers that the inclusive approach improves the chances of all students to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes without labelling disabled students as different and in need of compensation for their disabilities, thus promoting an inclusive learning environment from the start, reflecting disabled students' expectations in relation to equity in their learning experience. The team also suggests that an inclusive approach to assessment design will reduce the need for contingent and alternative arrangements, which are currently prevalent in HE and which take up a huge amount of time for both academic and support staff. The project report notes that compensatory approaches do not promote inclusive practice, and often involve little dialogue between academic and central support departments. In addition, practical issues around the availability of extra rooms, trained amanuenses and additional invigilators mean that the contingent approach to assessment is often a negative experience for the students it is designed to help. This has implications for the way in which we conceptualise both student support and programme design.

## Conclusion

Gorard's (2006) report for HEFCE on barriers to participation in higher education notes that students from "non-traditional" backgrounds tend to be viewed as a problem because of the assumptions we make about the capabilities of different groups.
The report suggests that the type of qualification students enter university with are only a weak indicator of subsequent academic performance, so we should therefore resist the temptation to excuse poor achievement rates among different groups of students by referring to their entry qualifications, and instead turn our attention to our teaching, learning and assessment strategies. For example, opportunities for formative assessment are crucial for students in creating confidence and a positive attitude towards their education, and promoting successful engagement with the cognitive demands of their programmes of study. Gorard's report suggests that learners – in particular those moving into higher education from vocational programmes of study - need:

- space to try out different approaches and develop their own ideas;

- the opportunity to become aware of their own progress and find out about themselves as learners;

- the opportunity to negotiate with tutors and/or their peers on assessment matters, including their marks.

To many students academia is a strange culture to which they need to adjust if they are to be able to perform well in assessment, and Gorard et al (2006) suggest that students from diverse educational backgrounds need to learn the "rules of the game" in order to do well in assessment at university. As Allen (1998) and others have suggested, promoting equality and diversity within the curriculum is "not just a matter of equal access to existing educational power structures, but of ultimately finding ways of transforming them".

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# A Computer-assisted Assessment Tool for Physiological Measurement within the School of Nursing

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## Context: aims and methodology

Computer-assisted assessment (CAA) is increasingly being used to assess student learning both formatively and summatively in higher education. CAA offers both pedagogical benefits and efficiency gains where appropriately and effectively implemented (CAA centre, 2007). This study investigated the use of Computer Assisted Assessment (CAA) in the School of Nursing. It was envisaged that CAA had the potential to enhance the student nurses' knowledge and understanding whilst working in harmony with existing assessment methods. The aims of the study reflected this stance in seeking to develop a series of online assessments, measure pre and post assessment self-perception of knowledge of subject areas being assessed and exploring both student views of the online assessment and the potential for further use of online assessment within nursing programmes.

A sample of nursing students who were 18 months into their three year Diploma programme (adult branch) took part in the CAA assessment, completed pre and post CAA questionnalires (n=104) and took part in four post-CAA focus groups (n=45 students)

The pre CAA questionnaire was designed to collect data on self-perception of IT skills, previous use of Blackboard (Bb) current use of Bb and a self-assessment of current knowledge of the subject areas being assessed. Having completed the pre- assessment questionnaire students were asked to access and complete three online assessments which were accessed via Blackboard. The post-CAA questionnaire asked students about their current Bb use, any problems encountered, where they accessed the assessments (university, home etc), their current self-assessment of knowledge in the subject areas tested, and perceived learning and finally, their attitudes towards CAA. Focus groups were conducted in order to explore in more depth the students' experiences, attitudes and feelings towards CAA. Data from the questionnaires was analysed for frequency counts expressed as true percentages, whilst focus group data was analysed for recurring themes using the standard methods of thematic analysis.

This summary which follows focuses on the piloting of CAA and the students' views of this assessment method. For a more detailed report and further details of self-perceived IT skills and Blackboard use please request a full report from j.hardicre@salford.ac.uk.

## Summary – self-assessment of knowledge and views regarding CAA

86% of the sample group had accessed and completed the CAAs. The students were asked to rate their **knowledge of the areas to be assessed via CAA pre and post study participation**. The results indicated that students assessed their knowledge base within the areas assessed as being lower after having undertaken the online assessments. This was true of all three assessments.

The participating students were asked to indicate whether they felt learning had taken place as a result of working through the CAA. 62% agreed, 11% disagreed whilst 27% were not sure. yet the majority felt that learning had taken place. This result taken with the fact that participating students had assessed themselves to be at a lower level after completing the assessments seems rather contradictory raising issues about the accuracy of the participants' self-assessment of their knowledge base prior to undertaking the assessments.

Participants were then asked if they would like to have access to more CAA in the future and which areas they would like to be assessed on (CAA).. 67% said they would like access to more CAA, 11% said they would not,, with 22% undecided. A variety of possible areas for future CAA were identified (such as drug calculations, blood transfusion and anatomy/physiology) all of which were feasible.

In terms of the whole experience it was acknowledged that working through CAA for the first time may evoke a variety of feelings which need to be recognized and explored. Following their experiences of working through the online assessments, the participants were asked to use three key words to describe their feelings and experiences of using the online assessments. Examples of positive responses were that the tests were 'convenient', 'educational', 'interesting' and 'rewarding'. Examples of negative responses were feeling 'stressed/pressured', feeling 'unclever/thick' and feeling 'scared of the unknown'.

On the whole the focus group registered a positive response to CAA with students feeling them to be to be 'valuable' and 'rewarding' and wished for more throughout the programme. The students enjoyed receiving immediate feedback which gave a clear indication of their knowledge level in particular areas i.e. 'knowing where I am at'. Some students felt that undertaking CAA 'made them learn' and commented on the positive aspects of being able to undertake the assessments either in their own home, within the University or whilst out on clinical placements. In the main the problems identified were technical in nature. For example, there were periods of time when the tests were not accessible due to Blackboard's temporary unavailability and some students experienced the online assessments 'crashing'.

## Acknowledgements

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# Poster Presentation in the Housing Studies HNC – a case of Evolving Innovative Assessment Strategy?

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## Context and rationale

In 2004/05 a new method of assessment was introduced to the Social Welfare and Housing module on the HNC Housing Studies which is a semester 2 module in the final year of the programme. The new assessment strategy involved students working in small groups of four or five to prepare and then present a poster and to individually submit a reflective commentary on the experience of working as a member of the team to produce the poster presentation. This original intervention was driven by a number of considerations.

Firstly, in previous cohorts students in their final year had tended to 'drift away' from the programme towards the end, with attendance falling off once students felt that they had acquired enough knowledge to complete a traditional essay-type assignment. I felt that a group task which involved a final presentation would provide a continued focus and motivation for students encouraging them to continue their learning and that the presentation in itself, would serve as a fitting 'finale' to the students' efforts throughout the programme.

Secondly, I felt that this assignment would offer students an appropriate means to develop and demonstrate skills of team-working, presenting information in a visual format ( assessment on the programme had previously been based on the submission of essays/reports) and marketing skills. The HNC programme is vocationally orientated. It recruits from those employed in various capacities by housing agencies, such as local authorities and housing associations who attend the University on a day-release basis to study for their professional qualification. I felt that the skills involved in the new assessment regime were particularly high-profile outcomes for this group of learners.

Finally, I wanted to introduce an assignment that would encourage students to develop greater awareness of their own roles vis-à-vis other agencies operating within the community. In the current policy and local governance climate it is increasingly important that those involved in housing provision should be aware of the concerns of other agencies and appreciate how housing provision impacts upon broader community objectives as articulated by these agencies.

## The evolving assignment brief

The module handbook details the assignment scenario as follows:

'The local authority, in partnership with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is holding an event to promote increased interagency awareness of the role of different agencies working in the area .The aim is to improve partnership working at local level to meet welfare needs. Representatives from the voluntary sector, the Primary Care Trust, Social Services, the Probation Service and Youth Offending teams as well as social housing providers such as the ALMO and housing associations will be attending the event.

You have been asked by your housing agency to prepare a poster to display at the event which explains the practical contribution your housing agency can or could make to meeting the health, social care and support needs of one of the following groups :

- older people
- people with mental health problems
- people with learning difficulties
- care leavers and young people aged 16-17
- those suffering from poverty and /or social exclusion'

If they wish, students can choose another client group subject to agreement with the module tutor. As mentioned above the assessment strategy originally included an individual reflective piece but in practice it seemed that the new focus on producing the poster itself detracted from considerations of the academic content of the module. In order to redress the balance in 2005/6 the individual reflective commentary was replaced by an individual briefing paper. So the assignment scenario as articulated in the module handbook now includes:

'You have also been asked, as acting policy and communications officer for the local consortium of social housing providers, to provide a briefing paper which puts forward the rationale for involvement of housing agencies in meeting welfare needs.'

The preparation and delivery of the group A1 size poster presentation constitutes 60% of the total assessment for the module. Students are advised to assume that the audience will be front-line and senior staff from a wide range of agencies, many of whom will have limited knowledge of the role of social housing providers and their potential contribution. In order to more nearly emulate the 'real-life' scenario in 2004/5 a representative from one of the sponsoring employers took part in the assessment of presentations. Although this did not happen in 2005/6 two representatives from sponsoring employers were involved in the assessment in 2006/07. To address the problem of imbalanced contribution to group effort, within the groups each member can award their colleagues a mark out of 10 representing their assessment of contribution to the effort of the group. Specific criteria for judging this are provided.

The other 40% of assessment for the module comprises the individually prepared briefing paper of about of about 750-1000 words. The module handbook advises students that the brief should outline the rationale for involving housing agencies more closely in meeting the health, social care and support needs of the chosen client group or in helping to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It should also provide a number of practice exemplars to illustrate how a housing agency can contribute to meeting these needs at least one of which should also illustrate the methods of collaboration/partnership between agencies used and show how this has helped to provide improved health/welfare outcomes of the service user. Finally, the briefing paper may refer to methods which could be used to tackle obstacles to interagency working.

## Is the strategy innovative and is it worthwhile?

On reflection I feel that this assessment strategy is innovative and worthwhile for a number of reasons:

- Inclusion of a visual piece of work in the assessment
- Vocationally relevant
- Employer involvement
- Students have to develop their ability to orally respond to questions or to 'think on their feet'
- A small element of peer assessment of contribution to group effort
- Students have remained motivated and involved to the end of the programme
- I've sensed a real feeling of pride in the creation of the poster-some students have discovered creative skills

This is probably where I need to do some evaluation….

# Paperless Assessment via VLE: the Pros and the Cons

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The aim of this short paper is to share our experience of paperless assessment using the submission facility provided in the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

An important part of a tutor's work is monitoring and assessing students' work on modules of study, in order to measure progress and attainment. Assessment may be continuous throughout the module to help students progress by providing feedback on their learning, or it may be a final summative examination to measure attainment at the end of the module. Most modules make use of a combination of the two types of assessment.

In the Research and Information Technology Skills (RITS) module in Salford Business School, we have endeavoured to use the Blackboard VLE to manage a portfolio of continuous assessment exercises and a final summative examination. This Level 1 module comprises activities to develop Information Communication Technology (ICT) and research skills, and is an important foundation for new students, both to encourage good study habits and to ensure that a minimum level of expertise in skills is achieved. Student numbers on this module were about 40 this year.

The continuous assessment takes the form of a series of six portfolio exercises, covering topics such as using email, MS Word and Excel, reflection on group working, using Command Prompt and XHTML web page development. With the exception of the email exercise, all of the students' work was submitted through the Blackboard Assignment Manager. Initially, the tutor sets up the submission facility for the students to upload their work but then can choose one of two ways of preparing and processing the submitted work:

- The tutor can download all of the submitted work into a single folder, which can be copied to a CD and taken away for marking, with grades subsequently being uploaded to the Blackboard Assignment Manager
- Each piece of work can be opened in Blackboard, marked and feedback for the student typed directly into the submission form.

In this module the end of semester examination is also submitted online. The examination consists of two parts, firstly students must answer a series of multiple choice questions presented using the Questionmark Perception software and secondly, they are required to produce a Word document, which is finally submitted in Blackboard.
The Questionmark Perception software is linked into Blackboard, so that when the students have completed the test, they submit their answers and their grade is returned to them immediately, at the same time as being posted to the Blackboard Assignment Manager. The prepared Word document is uploaded using Blackboard's submission facility. Since this part of the examination has to be marked and graded by the tutor in the same way as the continuous assessment exercises students do not receive their grade immediately.

Our experience of using Blackboard to support continuous assessment suggests a number of possible administrative benefits:

- The students do not need to print out their work to hand in at the office
- The submission date and time is clearly saved with the work
- Students can see their grade as they logon to Blackboard, along with the files they have submitted and subsequent feedback from the tutor.

Having used Blackboard to administer summative examinations, our experience again suggests that benefits may accrue to both staff and students from:

- The students receiving an immediate grade for the multiple choice question part of the examination
- The opportunity to provide typed rather than handwritten answers, as would be the case under traditional examination arrangements

Whilst there may be tangible benefits in conducting assessment via Blackboard in this way it is however, important to note that there are a number of issues to be considered which are not generally encountered in paper-based assessment completion and submission:

- Blackboard does not automatically email a message confirming the submission of the work, yet students can access their submitted work at any time after submission;
- Tutors may have to negotiate errors in the submission process, for instance when a student omits to press the final 'Submit' button when they have finished their work. Fortunately, there are ways of working around such errors but they all create additional work for the tutor;
- Unusual file corruption problems can occur, where students' work becomes unreadable – a problem which is not encountered in paper-based assignment submission
- A range of unpredictable errors can arise when students do not follow the submission instructions
- Students whose keyboard skills are not well developed may be disadvantaged in comparison with traditional examination conditions;
- Although the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment is becoming a popular resource for students and staff, the technical support for this is not available on a 24/7 basis this means that assignment submission deadlines can be compromised as a result of technical failures;

Anecdotally, our experience of using the Blackboard VLE for continuous assessment shows that the need for paper submissions can be eliminated, the process for grading work is more streamlined, and students do seem to appreciate the speed and quality of feedback afforded by online processes. The examination only required the printed instructions in hard copy, and students were pleased to receive part of the examination grade immediately. Although there are some drawbacks many of these will be minimised by greater familiarity with this innovative form of assessment on the part of both students and tutors.

# Notes

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