Benchmarking OU Assessment Feedback Practice and Mechanisms

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Benchmarking OU Assessment Feedback Practice and Mechanisms
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1. Executive Summary

The assessment programme has benchmarked OU’s practice in relation to providing students with feedback following assessment activities. Feedback systems and practice that take place elsewhere in the sector have been explored and a review carried out of current OU practice and recent OU scholarship in relation to assessment feedback. This report documents the results and findings.

There are 107 universities in England (HEFCE, 2016b), 15 in Scotland (Universities Scotland, 2016) 9 universities in Wales (Universities Wales, 2016) and 2 in Northern Ireland (NI Direct, 2016). Out of the total 133 universities in the United Kingdom, 25% (a total of 33) of the universities in the UK were interviewed for this research report.

The major findings are that HEIs have caught up with the OU in many aspects, in terms of online assessment, marking and feedback. The OU is seen as very traditional with an emphasis on academic rather than employability and inflexible in its approach, not providing a variety of mechanisms for assessment.

Exploration of FE, skills and work based learning is essential for the OU to develop a lead in trailblazer apprenticeships and the pending introduction of the levy. The OU is behind in relation to other universities.

There are considerable threats to the OU’s revenue stream in relation to the levy and growth of trailblazer apprenticeships, but at the same time opportunities for the OU to collaborate with new providers, such as within FE and become an assessment centre, as well as, a provider for apprenticeships.

The recommendations are for the OU to focus on three main areas: students first, employer engagement and staff and AL development.

The OU must start with students and involve them much more in working in partnership.

More employers working in partnership with the OU to ensure that curriculum and assessment provides work-ready students.

Like students, ALs also need to become fully integrated into the OU and supported in CPD and training to build their skills for effective assessment and the use of digital technologies.

Assessment needs to be designed that enhances employability and career development. Students need a portfolio that travels with them throughout their OU journey and demonstrates their work read skills and attributes for employability.
2. Summary of Request

The Assessment Programme has a cross-functional role to enhance the Open University’s approach to assessment through policy review and the identification and sharing of good practice resulting in an improved student experience.

A current priority area for the Programme is to maximise the student benefit associated with assessment feedback and feedforward. Making the most of assessment feedback and feedforward is an important area of work for the following reasons:

- The University contributes a significant amount of resource annually into assessment marking and feedback, both in terms of Associate Lecturer time, expertise and scholarship and in the financial investment in this area.
- Feedback is critical in order to support assessment for learning, enabling students to use the personalised teaching they receive in the form of feedback on their assignments to help them develop and improve as they continue their studies.
- The proposals for the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) include criteria relating to the quality of assessment and feedback.

The work to benchmark OU assessment feedback practice and mechanisms has been in two parts. The first part was a review of OU practice carried out by Associate Lecturer Dr. Ole Jensen and the report for this first part, is shown in Appendix C. The second part was a review of practice external to the OU, carried out by Associate Lecturer Katharine Jewitt.

The primary focus of this activity is on feedback to students on undergraduate taught courses in UK Higher Education Institutions.

The outputs of this work will be used to inform the priorities for the Assessment Programme in 2016/17. As an institutional Programme it is anticipated that the subsequent activities undertaken within the Programme following this report may lead to impact across all CAUs.

3. Scope and Objectives

The focus of this report is on practice in relation to assessment feedback external to the University. The scope includes all types of feedback (e.g. peer, tutor, automated), all types of assessment (e.g. written assignments, interactive quizzes, exams, etc.), and all mechanisms of feedback delivery (e.g. through systems, face-to-face, written feedback, etc.). The primary focus of this report is on feedback to students on undergraduate taught courses.
It must be noted that the research was limited in scope, by requiring to be completed within 8 days and the production of the report taking an additional 3 days.

The scope was limited to undergraduate taught courses at university institutions within the UK.

The objectives of this fully referenced written report is to provide the following:

The findings from contract 1

Clear statements of best practice, both from within the University and from other HE providers

An analysis of how the Open University is performing in this area compared with other HE providers – where does the University excel? What could be improved?

Recommendations for future areas of development for the University

4. Methods

All information collated for the production of this report relate to current practice within the 2015-2016 academic year. All staff interviewed / surveyed were currently employed in UK university institutions. Data for the production of this report was collected through a mix of interviews that took place face-to-face, via Skype, telephone and through an online survey using the software called Survey Monkey (Survey Monkey, 2016).

Desktop research was also carried out, consulting published reports, papers and university websites. Interviewees also provided direction to specific websites providing further information on assessment initiatives and these were followed up to incorporate into the research findings.

There are 107 universities in England (HEFCE, 2016b), 15 in Scotland (Universities Scotland, 2016), 9 universities in Wales (Universities Wales, 2016) and 2 in Northern Ireland (NI Direct, 2016). Out of the total 133 universities in the United Kingdom, this report has surveyed 25% (a total of 33) of the universities in the UK. A list of all institutions interviewed in the production of this report with a list of contacts can be found in Appendix A.

During the project scoping, it was expected that the Associate Lecturer would interview other Associate Lecturers who work in other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), however, no Associate Lecturer would agree to discussing their home institution. A mix of the following reasons were specified:

The research has not undergone ethical approval with explanation to how the data will be used and encrypted.

The research was unethical because it was being based on one person’s opinion at an institution.
Associate Lecturers were not comfortable in discussing their institution and being quoted. Associate Lecturers felt the project was unethical if best practice was only to be highlighted at their institution and they did not feel the research was providing an ethical and fair representation.

The above reasons were only highlighted by Associate Lecturers. The author was able to interview contacts from external networks available. Some wished to remain anonymous and this is reflected in the contact list shown in Appendix A.

A set of questions were produced to discuss with staff within the United Kingdom Higher Education sector. The questions encompassed the following:

- Assessment feedback practice
- Systems for sharing assessment feedback with students
- An indication of how (a) and (b) above compares to Open University practice
- Recommendations of good practice in relation to approaches both at the Open University and within other Higher Education Institutions

Questions were asked around the following key themes:

- Academic Practice
- Processes and Technologies
- Employability
- Systems for Sharing Assessment Feedback with Students
- Strategy and Policy
“Nothing that we do to, or for, our students is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we give them on it. The results of our assessment influence our students for the rest of their lives and careers – fine if we get it right, but unthinkable if we get it wrong.”

(Race et al, 2005)
5. Introduction

The next few years are likely to see dramatic change across HE and FE given recent developments in the national context such as the announcements about a possible Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the potential introduction of the levy, the rollout of trailblazer apprenticeships, removing the caps on student numbers, and increasing use and experimentation with new technologies. Are our assessment and feedback processes sufficiently fit for purpose in this changing context and what can we learn from recent innovation and initiatives in this area?

This report explores the responses from HEIs in the UK about assessment, feedback and feed forward. It will highlight the strengths and weaknesses within the OU and make a series of recommendations.

6. Academic Feedback Practice

6.1 Audit tools to analyse tutor feedback

60% of institutions surveyed reported that no audit tools were used to analyse tutor feedback. 33% of institutions carried out audits using TESTA’s guidance (TESTA, 2016a and TESTA, 2016b). Institutions follow a similar moderation process to The Open University, as well as, online feedback, use of Turnitin and external examiners. All HEIs interviewed, carry out satisfaction surveys at the end of each module. Feedback also occurs during staff – student representative meetings. London Metropolitan sets the scene with an Assessment Framework document that explores and supports good practice.

6.2 Support mechanisms to help staff build confidence in the formation and reliability of their assessment judgements

All institutions followed similar processes to The Open University with marking rubrics, scripts second marked and feedback provided. New staff are allocated a mentor. Staff are mentored through the moderation process online. Staff have the opportunity to gain accreditation with The Higher Education Academy. Institutions surveyed placed a greater responsibility and emphasis on teaching staff gaining qualifications than at The Open University. The OU provide the staff fee waiver, but at other institutions all new staff are automatically registered on qualifications, in addition, to the support provided by The Open University, for example, the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), a Postgraduate Certificate in Education
(PgCEd), Certificate in Learning and Teaching (CILT). London Metropolitan also run “Managing the Assessment and Feedback Process” and Northumbria University run a learning and teaching support programme.

6.3 Opportunities taken to share the rationale for assessment judgements among colleagues to give confidence in such judgements

All institutions surveyed followed similar processes to The Open University. Approaches are frequently discussed at module team meetings and program level meetings. Staff develop an understanding of the programme wide approaches to assessment, feedback and feed forward through module briefings, staff development events, monitoring reports, second marking, communications from the module teams and discussions in module forums and examination boards.

At the OU, the PT3 feedback form is consistent but there are varied practices for assignment briefs, assessment criteria, marking rubrics and other aspects both between and within faculties and even departments.

At Northumbria University, there is a learning and teaching lead in each department whose main role is to support enhancement of learning and teaching. They regularly support staff and provide workshops, exchange of good practice at a local level, although it is not just focussed on assessment.

6.4 Student Involvement in Assessment Practice Dialogue

All institutions reported of student partnership initiatives, student – staff liaison committees and student representation in teaching, learning and assessment groups, as well as, student union activity and contributions into policy drafting; but all reported that there should be much more involvement of students right through the university. TESTA audits (TESTA, 2016a and 2016b) are also used to gather student views. At the University of Exeter, students help with curriculum and assessment design. UCL have a major programme called ChangeMakers (UCL, 2016). At London Metropolitan University, Student Academic Representatives (StARs) are involved in gathering feedback across the modules of a whole course, in week seven and this is collated and given to module leaders for action.

At Northumbria University, there is student representation throughout the university systems and committee structures including on the approval of new modules and their assessment approach. There are also regular termly course committees where student representatives are encouraged to provide feedback on assessment, as well as, other aspects of their taught modules. The Students Union is also highly active in the learning and teaching arena and has had its own campaigns on assessment practice, driven by the students themselves.
7 Systems for Sharing Assessment Feedback with Students

7.1 Students induction into assessment, feedback and feed forward practices

Very similar activities take place across HEIs with induction sessions and guidance in module guides and through tutors. Students are provided with online study skills resources and provided with ‘how to’ guides. All ensured there was an assessment in the first six weeks of the module start. All students at the University of Gloucestershire complete a skills module (University of Gloucestershire, 2016a and 2016b)

At The Open University, there is development from level 1 through to level 3, however in practice there are some assessments which are novel and students may not be inducted into them very well. However, the feedback and feedforward practice is consistent across all modules. ALs run day schools and tutorials on assessment.

7.2 Students developing their own assessment, feedback and feed forward practice

The OU’s monitoring scheme is highly effective and ensures a high standard of feedback to students. It is very rare for other institutions to have peer assessment of feedback in the way that the OU does with its monitoring system. A key strength in assessment is how the OU has some assignments where students are given marks for demonstrating how they have responded to feedback on a previous assignment. Institutions surveyed thought this was revolutionary.

All HEIs interviewed advised they needed to be better at this, but were all demonstrating some form of student development including peer feedback and peer tutoring sessions, self-assessment through rubrics, formative assignments to introduce the feed forward process, self-reflection through portfolios. Peer assessment and self-assessment play a big part at South Bank University. Coventry University place a great emphasis on group work and operate a group assessment policy and guide (Coventry University, 2016). At London Metropolitan University, they use a PASS scheme and Success Coaches from this are embedded into one specific first year module per course to work alongside first year students to help de-construct assignments and deepen understanding.
7.3 Student Participation in Subject-Based Communities

All HEIs make use of Moodle (or similar) for students to participate in subject-based communities and many also ran face-to-face groups on campus. At UCL, student participation in subject-based communities is central to their Connected Curriculum and E-Learning Strategy. The University of Essex have the Guild of Students societies. The University of St Mark and St John have moved away from subject discipline to interdisciplinary programmes and different programmes share modules, which has resulted in fragmented learning communities generated through student friendship groups.

The Student Union at Northumbria University has developed a number of student based societies and there are also a number of student societies as part of the wider professional bodies. Students are also encouraged to be part of the wider departmental communities. The university is keen to develop staff-student communities around discipline areas.

At the Open university, this takes place a little, but appears ineffective because students are time poor and focus on core activities. Open University students are module focused. London Metropolitan said they shared the same problem with time poor students and it was difficult for students to realise the value of this.

Only 18% of institutions reported that students’ local subject-based communities played a role in facilitating collaboration about assessment standards. This does not happen at The Open University. At UCL, this is part of their Connected Curriculum benchmarking document and at Reading, students are formerly part of the Board of Studies.

8 Strategy and policy

8.1 Institutional Approach to Strategy

100% of institutions interviewed advised their institution’s approach to assessment and feedback was articulated in their institutional strategy and articulated at an institution-wide level rather than at a devolved level.

8.2 Staff Guidance

100% of institutions advised that staff were provided guidance in implementing policy through training, online guides, workshops and CPD days. At Bedford, all staff attend compulsory sessions and there is guidance online and hard copy. UCL engaged staff in an
active programme of staff development, the Connected Curriculum Working Group on Assessment & Feedback, and Annual Student Experience Review.

9 Curriculum design

9.1 Full Overview of its Assessment Activity and Implications

The OU does not currently have a full overview of its assessment activity and the implications of submission peaks on administrative support, IT systems and implications for students where they student concurrent modules with clashing deadlines. 85% of institutions reported they did.

9.2 Assessment FOR learning vs assessment OF learning

All institutions reported that learning assessment for learning is emphasised, as opposed to assessment of learning, but all unclear to the scale that students understand this.

10. Employability

10.1 Valuing Student self and peer evaluative capabilities

100% of HEIs reported the development of student self and peer evaluative capability was valued as an important attribute of employable graduates but all reported that more work needed to be done. At the Open University, it is not supported well.

10.2 Online Submission Policy

100% of HEIs reported having an online submission policy and like the OU, all operate online for submission, marking and feedback. Sheffield Hallam (see Fig 1) have just introduced a new policy for summative assessment which starts in September 2016 (Sheffield Hallam University, 2016c). They have also developed an assessment interactive resource (Sheffield Hallam University 2016b) and Assessment Essentials (Sheffield Hallam University, 2016a).
Fig 1: Visual representation of Assessment Lifecycle, an assessment interactive resource being introduced by Sheffield Hallam University in September 2016 (Sheffield Hallam University 2016b)
Students express more dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback than with any other aspect of their learning experience, according to the National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2016a).
11 Strengths in The Open University’s Assessment

The Open University receives one of the highest ratings of any university for feedback in the National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2016a). Associate Lecturer mentoring and training on how to give feedback is highly effective. Associate Lecturers are provided with everything they need, for example, marking schemes, exemplars of good feedback and advice on using the ‘OU sandwich’ of positive comments, advice on how to improve, followed by an encouraging summary.

The OU’s monitoring scheme is highly effective and ensures a high standard of feedback to students. It is very rare for other institutions to have peer assessment of feedback in the way that the OU does with its monitoring system.

A key strength in assessment is how we have some assignments where students are given marks for demonstrating how they have responded to feedback on a previous assignment. Institutions surveyed thought this was revolutionary.

The OU operates strict rules for the timely return of feedback and monitor tutor adherence to this. Feedback from Associate Lecturers arrives within 10 working days, in comparison to all other institutions surveyed who work to 3 working weeks for turnaround back to students.

Developing reflective skills enhances learning, such as peer review, peer assessment and student self-reflection

The Open University provide clear grade criteria, which makes it easy for students to follow a clear brief and assess themselves before submitting their assessments.

Student Home enables students to study from any device, at any time, in any place and have full access to their course materials.

All marking and feedback is on line and students have a clear view of their progress and marks.

12 Weaknesses in The Open University’s Assessment

Students tick off each module in turn and fail to see the links between them. Associate Lecturers can be similarly focused on their own module responsibilities and do not have the
mechanisms to view previous feedback and feedforward from prior modules. This method can fragment learning. Students receive feedback on a module, then it stops and they move onto the next one with a new Associate Lecturer who knows nothing about what the feedback was and whether the student is acting upon the feedback from the previous module. There’s no system to enable continuity.

There’s a strong focus on traditional assessment formats at The Open University, such as essays and examinations and the lack of flexibility is seen as a weakness, which other institutions use to their advantage. Traditional methods are not necessarily the best means of testing students in the achievement of learning outcomes nor are they necessarily creating the best work-ready students with the right skills to demonstrate to employers.

Students do not have choice and variety to demonstrate their assessment and learning, nor are they able to take advantage of a wide range of digital technology to suit their preferences.

The Open University places a greater emphasis on academic assessment than employability skills.

There is strong evidence that we do need to pause and reflect on the processes and practices which underpin assessment - and feedback practices - in the OU. A series of four infographics (see Figs 2 – 5) now follow to provide visual stimulus for discussion on improvements in assessment, feedback and feedforward. The four images portray a journey to achieve excellence in assessment practice.
Fig 2: A roadmap demonstrating student engagement in assessment, feedback and feedforward
Fig 3: Enhancing Assessment for all Students
Fig 4: Envisaging the OU responding positively to change factors
Fig 5: Build Capacity to Support New Kinds of Assessment

13 Recommendations

Develop a Systematic Assessment Literacy Programme

There is potential for a much more systematic assessment literacy programme to equip students with the necessary understanding of assessment processes, as well as, that which is related to content.

Make use of social networking for assessment

The Open University does not widely utilise social networking, such as, Twitter and Facebook to encourage students in developing their own assessment, feedback and feed forward practice. In fact, social networking is designed very little into course modules for collaborative working, assessment and feed forward. It is recommended this is introduced with Associate Lecturers recruited to manage sites.
Develop Modern Assessment Formats

Utilise digital technology and embed in curriculum design to provide personal choice to students on how they produce their assessed work and create interesting and novel formats for students to engage in their learning and think differently about assessment, whilst also encouraging creativity, collaborative working, problem-solving and inquisitive enquiry.

Build a system to enable continuity of feedback and feedforward.

Investigate a moodle reporting tool plugin on the VLE so Associate Lecturers can draw upon past feedback, as well as, students to progress their learning journey and assessment career, to create an ongoing dialogue for assessment.

Develop an online portfolio of work that can be utilised by Associate Lecturers with their students so students have some ideas about how to act on feedback.

Curriculum Design Improvement

The OU does not currently have a full overview of its assessment activity and the implications of submission peaks on administrative support, IT systems and implications for students where they student concurrent modules with clashing deadlines. The closure of regional offices at the OU and subsequent restructuring is also impacting ALs in terms of running day schools for assessment preparation and has been a topic of discussion on AL forums. Regional centres previously had a full overview and ALs could group bookings together and hold a day school in the morning and one in the afternoon to save travel time and costs. This is no longer possible because the planning is managed separately and there is no overall picture available.

Introduction of pre-induction skills development for new students and for Associate Lecturers and Staff to also benefit from digital skills training

From the experience of the author in moderating the “Getting Started” Forum between 2009-2010, for new students starting their study with The Open University and from experience generally with new students, they are always eager to begin their learning journey. Before students start their course, the OU could utilise this time to help students identify their learning preferences and help them discover how technology can aid their study. It is recommended that The Open University develops an active pre-induction online community where students can meet, speak to existing students and staff, take virtual tours and begin building their digital identity and start their e-portfolio / CV for life. Before students start their course, learners would know what digital content and services are available and how they can log in and start being fed with news and messages, bite size introductory work pieces, quizzes and receive motivational messages and handy hints and tips before they start etc. The Open University has developed a wide range of useful resources, such as The Open University Library’s digital skills and the student skills toolkit, which would be useful starting foundations for new students. It
is recommended that the development of skills to support the use of digital technology for assessment practice is reviewed for both Associate Lecturers and Students.

There needs to be more funding for ALs to be involved in the OU and to be supported in CPD and training. As an example, there is a call out currently for ALs to work as representatives with an offer of half a day pay for their time to attend Milton Keynes. It would take many ALs more than half a day in travel to attend Milton Keynes, not counting the duration of the committee meeting and work around attending this, so it does make it cost effective for ALs to be involved. This has to be addressed to ensure better representation.

**Develop Reflective Skills**

Make more use of online digital tools and technology to develop assessment literacy and engage students to work more collaboratively in assessing their peers work. Utilising technology enables students to work anonymously online to build their confidence, as they don’t always respect their own ability to assess their peers. This helps them to perform better in their own work because if they are able to critically evaluate other students’ work, they can critically evaluate their own work better. The act of giving feedback is cognitively demanding, engages students more actively and they spend time thinking about the criteria.

The use of virtual worlds is beneficial for anonymous working and building confidence. It is recommended that the OU review the revival of its virtual world and enable students to make use of existing virtual spaces on Second Life ®. See also Shareville, a virtual town, created by Birmingham City University which enables students to engage with a variety of real life scenarios (Birmingham City University, 2016)

** Carry out regular audits to improve assessment**

Carry out audits using TESTA’s guidance, which was the method utilised by institutions surveyed. See TESTA’s (2016a) guidance on revised assessment patterns that work and 10 steps to auditing a programme (TESTA, 2016b).

**Introduce a Portfolio and Blog that travels with the Student for their whole learning journey**

Provide the mechanism for students to keep a portfolio and blog which travels with OU students throughout their learning journey. Support students in gaining professional memberships to support career development and incorporate the use of the portfolio in self-reflection assessment activity and enable learners to capture and reflect on their process of learning.

**Develop Employability Skills**

To encourage students to be involved in working as partners, create a defined role that will be career and CV enhancing, such as becoming a Student Fellow.
Support students through their learning, assessment and use of their portfolio and blog to provide rich evidence of employability skills and make use of a wide range of technology to suit their preference, such as, through audio and video recording, creating a poster and work based learning projects, working on real-life issues and problems. Students can capture work-related performance for appraisal by their mentor.

Embed employability into assessment and develop competencies and capabilities that go beyond academic knowledge. Build into curriculum, students working together in teams, as they would in industry using digital tools.

**Recruit Students and Employers as Change Agents, Assessment Champions and Partners**

Involve students and employers as change agents and partners and ask them what they need.

It is recommended, the Student Association is involved in promoting campaigns and engaging students about assessment, self-reflection and maintain a portfolio and blog.

**Expand on Peer Assessment through use of a Peer Assessment Tool**

Web Peer Assessment (Web PA) online tool was built by Loughborough University (2016) and is used by a number of institutions. It enables groups working on assignments to assess and grade their own and their peers’ achievements. Students are allocated into groups and follow a set marking criteria.

**Collaborate with Further Education Colleges, Work Based Learning and the Skills Sector**

A dialogue across sector stakeholders to address assessment challenges, particularly with the development of apprenticeships at The Open University and the pending introduction of the levy. Learn from other sectors in relation to apprenticeships, work based learning and the development of employability.

**14 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the recommendations of this report can be summed up in six key points, in order to, improve assessment, feedback and feed forward:

1. A fresh approach that is learner focused. The norm is not acceptable. A new strategy that reverberates across the university with a new communication strategy opening up the employer, staff and student voice.

2. Leadership competency programme for all staff and Associate Lecturers. The right team set the ethos. Staff and ALs must be supported in their skills development and stronger emphasis on continuous professional development and
3. Link up with others to collaborate and share best practice. Resources are limited. Gain inspiration from pockets of excellence everywhere. We don’t necessarily have to collaborate from a competitor, it could be Starbucks coffee shop and their staff training. The OU must also engage with FE, skills and work based learning to learn from their innovations.

4. Assessment that makes the OU unique and responds to students and employers. Working with particular groups to introduce bespoke and targeted assessment materials and courses, eg with organisations, the unemployed.

5. Reward staff and Associate Lecturers who perform well. OU staff must feel valued.

6. No complacency. Innovation is the new norm.
15 References


University of Exeter’s (2016b) *Student Attributes* [Online]. Available at [http://www.exeter.ac.uk/about/vision/educationstrategy/attributes](http://www.exeter.ac.uk/about/vision/educationstrategy/attributes) (Accessed 27 June 2016).


Appendix A: Contact List

The following table provides a list of institutions and contacts

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Contact Email Address</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Requests to remain Anonymous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edinburgh Napier University</td>
<td>Mark Carver <a href="mailto:m.carver@napier.ac.uk">m.carver@napier.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td><a href="mailto:Anita.hall@imperial.ac.uk">Anita.hall@imperial.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>Katharine Jewitt <a href="mailto:k.jewitt@open.ac.uk">k.jewitt@open.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td><a href="mailto:m.vogel@ucl.ac.uk">m.vogel@ucl.ac.uk</a> / <a href="mailto:domi.sinclair@ucl.ac.uk">domi.sinclair@ucl.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Dundee</td>
<td><a href="mailto:s.y.robertson@dundee.ac.uk">s.y.robertson@dundee.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>University of Exeter</td>
<td>Corony Edwards <a href="mailto:contact@coronyedwards.co.uk">contact@coronyedwards.co.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Glasgow</td>
<td>Katharine Jewitt <a href="mailto:k.jewitt.1@research.gla.ac.uk">k.jewitt.1@research.gla.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>University of Reading</td>
<td>David Nutt <a href="mailto:d.nutt@reading.ac.uk">d.nutt@reading.ac.uk</a></td>
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<td>University of Sheffield</td>
<td>Bryony Olney <a href="mailto:b.olney@sheffield.ac.uk">b.olney@sheffield.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>Stephan – contact on Twitter @dotsandspaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of South Wales</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Kath.elley@southwales.ac.uk">Kath.elley@southwales.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of St Mark and St John</td>
<td>Dr. Paul Sutton <a href="mailto:psutton@marjon.ac.uk">psutton@marjon.ac.uk</a> 01752 636700 x4307</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Warwick</td>
<td>Debbi Marais <a href="mailto:d.arais@warwick.ac.uk">d.arais@warwick.ac.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the West of England</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Deborah.Sturge@uwe.ac.uk">Deborah.Sturge@uwe.ac.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Wolverhampton</td>
<td><a href="mailto:helenfairhall@yahoo.co.uk">helenfairhall@yahoo.co.uk</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Worcester</td>
<td>Andrew Hoaen – <a href="mailto:a.hoaen@worc.ac.uk">a.hoaen@worc.ac.uk</a></td>
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Appendix B: Survey Questions

14 Questions used to survey HE institutions on Assessment and Feedback

Academic Feedback Practice

1. Does your institution use any audit tools to analyse tutor feedback? If yes, how is this done?
2. Are there support mechanisms, such as mentoring to help staff build confidence in the formation and reliability of their assessment judgements? If yes, how is this done?
3. Are opportunities taken to share the rationale for assessment judgements among colleagues to give confidence in such judgements? If yes, how is this done?
4. How are students involved in dialogue around developing the University’s assessment practice?

Systems for Sharing Assessment Feedback with Students

5. How are students inducted into assessment, feedback and feed forward practices?
6. How are students encouraged to engage in developing their own assessment, feedback and feed forward practice?
7. Are students encouraged to participate in subject-based communities?
8. Do local subject-based communities play a role in facilitating collaboration about assessment standards?

Strategy and policy

9. Is your institution’s approach to assessment and feedback articulated in institutional strategy and, if so, at what level institution-wide or devolved?
10. What guidance exists to help staff apply the principles in practice?

Curriculum design

11. Does your institution have a full overview of its assessment activity and the implications of submission peaks on administrative support, IT systems and implications for students where they study concurrent modules with clashing deadlines?
12. To what extent does your institution emphasise learning assessment FOR learning vs assessment OF learning?

Employability

13. Is the development of student self and peer evaluative capability valued as an important attribute of employable graduates?

Processes and technologies

14. Does your institution have a policy on online submission and/or online feedback/ online marking?
Appendix C: Review of OU Assessment Best Practice

Assessment feedback:
Review of OU policies and practices

July 2016,
by Dr. Ole Jensen,
Associate lecturer
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Bibliography

Appendix 1 Principles of OU assessment policy
Appendix 2 Social Sciences Faculty assessment policy
Executive summary

OU assessment policy guidelines establish a strong commitment to feedback strategies and policies that position students as active learners, with feedback encouraging the building of productive, reflective learning and providing opportunities for dialogue. The social science assessment policy guidelines provide an example of how assessment criteria that are appropriate to study levels are developed within these guidelines.

There is, in the resources made available for this exercise, a leap from the explained practice to an understanding of the broader strategy. In OU assessment policy guidelines, an assessment strategy is an explicit requirement (Principle 2) as well as an implicit guidance, as expressed in the understanding of feedback as one step in an AL-student dialogue. Most examples of good practice are, however, specific interventions, restricted to one assignment, or parts there-of. While instructive and useful in their own right, it can be difficult to understand how specific interventions fit in with broader assessment strategies.

There is in the SEFAR report on student experiences, completed in 2015, a significant contrast between a high level of satisfaction with TMA feedback and much lower satisfaction levels regarding end of module feedback. A strong student demand for more student-teacher dialogue around TMA feedback resonates well with 2009 research that points to a request for feedback that both addresses issues relating to the specific assignment and provides clear directions for future improvements.

According to OU policy guidelines, the effectiveness of feedback depends as much on what students do with the comments as with the composition of the feedback. Whereas monitoring structures are in place to ensure that the nature and composition of feedback is appropriate, there is also awareness among OU staff that that student response and uptake is less well understood.

There are examples of practices that aim to encourage tutor-student dialogue around assessment feedback. A couple of low-tech case studies signposts how student response to tutor feedback can be encouraged by making student response part of a subsequent assignment. Other practices make more use of Virtual Learning Tools (VLT), for example screen casts and audio-recordings.

Peer review and learning is an area of increasing focus, in terms of both scholarship and teaching practices. There are a number of pioneering examples of good practice, making use of tutor group forums and other kinds of VLT. But this is also a mode of teaching where a comparatively high level of student reluctance needs to be negotiated.

Looking ahead

As part of the re-design of the OU Assessment Hub, it may be useful to re-visit the Assessment Bank and ensure that all practices are backed up by additional documents and/or URLs that can facilitate up-take and replication. It would also be helpful if the date of entry into the bank is entered as part of the form. Similarly, there are many insufficiently documented projects stored under Scholarship Exchange. Apart from a short project summary, a familiar message is ‘no documents yet’, even where the project had been completed.

The extent to which peer review and peer learning is practiced within OU remains unclear. With the emerging emphasis on peer review and peer learning, as also reflected in the over-arching principles of assessment policy, it might be useful to consider a review of peer review strategies and practices from across the OU. Whereas the Practice and Promise report bring together views from across the OU, the rather low AL representation is striking. Perhaps an effort to specifically target AL practices and experiences is asked for.
1.0 Introduction
The aim of this report is to retrieve and review findings from scholarship and teaching within the OU in order to inform the benchmarking of OU assessment feedback. With this ‘inside-the-walls’ focus, the report thus also serves to inform a subsequent report, aiming to benchmark OU practice against practice in the broader HEI sector.

Within this remit, emphasis of the report is on feedback for learning rather than measurement, altogether very much in line with OU Assessment Policy Guidelines that stresses how assessment should contribute to the development of independent, reflexive learners, development of forward-feeding practices and a more dialogic tutor-student relationship.

After outlining the methodology, the next sections of this report will reiterate some of the relevant aspects of OU assessment policy, and summarise findings from recent research on how staff and students perceive assessment feedback. It will then present examples of respectively tutor-student dialogue around assessment feedback and the use of peer review and assessment.

2.0 Methodology
Apart from a very cursory nod to recent literature on assessment feedback, the primary focus is a review of OU policies, practices and scholarship relating to assessment feedback, to the extent that these have been made available through the following sources:

The OU assessment hub: Apart from the ‘assessment bank’, comprising good practices from across the university, the OU Assessment Hub also holds a wide range of policy guidelines, as well as literature on assessment pedagogy.

Scholarship Exchange: This is a resource bringing together documents, articles, and projects relating to scholarship in the OU.

It should be noted that the documentation of teaching practices is of highly varying standard. Whereas the pre-given template situates practices in the assessment bank in relation to pre-given criteria, outlines are often very short. There is often no additional information, and sometimes no URL, that can enable further familiarisation with the practice. Similarly, while Scholarship is imminently searchable, the experience can be disappointing, as many potentially relevant research projects hold ‘no documents yet’, even when the projects are finished.

In addition to these sources, the report will summarise the main findings from recent reports in relation to the main stakeholders in the OU teaching experience. This is the study titled ‘Student experience of feedback, assessment and revision (SEFAR) Project’ (Cross et al 2015), and the report titled ‘Assessment: Practice and promise’ (Whitelock and Cross 2014), compiling views from OU staff, external examiners and students.

3.0 Good feedback – definitions and policies
Written feedback is, evidently, part of the learning process, alerting the student to: What good performance is; how current performance relates to good performance; how to act to close the gap between current and good performance (Sadler 1989). Good feedback is thus information that helps students to reduce the discrepancy between their intentions and the resulting effects (Nicol 2006, p208).

Within this context, arguments have been made for reframing assessment, and thus feedback, in higher education in order to focus on learning rather than simply measurement. Research has shown that learning is best supported ‘...when feedback is viewed as a relational process that takes place over time, is dialogic, and is integral to the whole process of learning and teaching itself’ (Sambell 2011, p3). Feedback as dialogue means that the student not only receives initial feedback information, but also has the opportunity to engage the teacher in discussion about that feedback (Nicol 2006, p210).

These concerns are also reflected in the two core purposes of the OU assessment policies that were launched in 2013: ‘Measuring student learning such that it can be recognised through the award of credit – assessment for certification; creating opportunities for learning with feedback – assessment for learning’ (Assessment Policy Committee 2013, p2). The concerns are reflected in the seven principles of assessment practice at the OU that
were approved by the OU Assessment Policy Committee in 2013. Whereas it is beyond the remit of this report to present all these principles, two of them provide important guidance towards what good, formative feedback may constitute. They are:

‘Principle 5
Feedback is an integral part of assessment and can drive student behaviour. It should be given on all assessments, including exams to support students in moving forward to their next module or formal learning experience. Feedback should position students as active learners, encourage productive reflective knowledge building, offer students opportunities for dialogue around their learning and facilitate future learning.

Principle 6
Students should be given opportunities to engage in and develop their skills in peer review and self-assessment.’
(Assessment Policy Committee 2013, p5-6)

Additionally, in relation to Principle 5 the guidelines emphasize that rather than only operating within the strict learning parameters of the particular assignment, ‘...feedback must be recognised as one step in an AL-student dialogue’ (Assessment Policy Committee 2013, p6). Similarly, it is stressed that ‘the effectiveness of feedback depends as much on what students do with the comments, as on the composition of the feedback’ (ibid). But this is also embedded in the broader principle of assessment as contributing to ‘...the development of self-regulated reflexive independent learners’ (Principle 1). Similarly, the notion of feedback as a continued dialogue is also related to the development of assessment strategies, ‘...outlining the relationship between learning and assessment’ (Principle 2).

Whereas Principle 5 provides an opportunity to reflect on the design of existing practices and potentially rethink tutor-student dynamics, Principle 6 can be seen as more of an urge to break new ground. As this report will demonstrate, scholarship on peer review/learning/assessment is emerging, as are relevant case studies, but it is still an area where the evidence base is less well consolidated.

Under OU Assessment Policy umbrella, additional policy guidelines are developed at Faculty level, adapting policy guidelines to different Levels of Study. The Faculty of Social Sciences Assessment Policy does, for example, include a gradual shift of focus and learning dynamics from Level 1, where ‘Assessment should engage students in academic conventions and build academic literacy by practising and developing skills across a series of assessments’ and ‘Assessment should require a participatory element so that students learn together and from interaction with each other, over Level 2 where ‘Assessment should require collaborative practice’, to Level 3 where students are required to undertake ‘Students should undertake substantial self-directed assessment’. Similarly, ‘Assessment should include a process of engaging in critical appraisal of others’ contributions via presentations to peers/participation in an online group, reflecting on and changing of own work accordingly, and in which each student can demonstrate the use of their own initiative to determine their objectives in seeking peer evaluation’ (Faculty of Social Sciences 2013, p11). Accordingly, it is envisaged that processes of learning and assessment become increasingly student-led.

4.0 Views from students and staff

This section outlines views from students and OU staff, based on reports emerging over the past couple of years.

4.1 Students

This section is largely based on the project titled ‘Student Experience of Feedback, Assessment and Revision’ (SEFAR), completed in 2015 (Cross et al 2015). Based on questionnaire responses from 281 students and telephone follow-up interviews with 13 students, the study identified a number of areas for further attention. Whereas there was a demand for more support for revision and in the pre-exam period, there was also

---

1 Please refer to Annex 1 for a complete list.
2 For full Faculty of Social Sciences Assessment Policy, see https://learn3.open.ac.uk/mod/subpage/view.php?id=48395. Contrary to this gradual building of participatory approaches, recent OU research has suggested that peer review/assessment should also be introduced on Level 1 modules (Mapple and Parsons 2014).
3 Please refer to the Executive Summary section of the full SEFAR report for a complete list of these areas.
significant interest in alternative ways of organising tutor support. Accordingly, 86% of students said they would find it helpful to talk to their tutor about TMA feedback, and 77% would find it helpful to receive feedback on TMA drafts in addition to their final script (Cross et al 2015, p2). But the delivery and quality of end of module assessments were found lacking, with only 29% of students expressing satisfaction with the quality of end of module feedback (ibid). This very much contrasts the high levels of satisfaction with TMA feedback, with 81.9% agreeing with the statement that ‘I was satisfied with the quality of the feedback my tutor gave me’ (ibid, p12).

From the perspective of forward-feeding assessment feedback, it is positive to note that 44% of students taking exams said that they used TMA feedback for future assignments and for revision (ibid, p12). Referring to a ‘subgroup of conscious learners’, the report argues that ‘...promoting the use of feedback in future assignments may help encourage more students to use it for revision as well’ (ibid, p12).

When asked for their opinion on three alternative types of tutor-led assessment (feedback on TMA draft; feedback given as audio or video; opportunity to talk to tutor about feedback), 77.3% of students said that they would find feedback on draft ‘very helpful’ or ‘helpful’, and 85.7% would welcome an opportunity to talk to their tutor about their feedback. The audio/video option, on the other hand, was less popular among respondents, with only 25.8% finding that option ‘very helpful’ or ‘helpful’ (ibid: 16).

Opportunities for peer feedback and collaboration, with the tutor in more of a facilitating role, were typically less favoured. One-fifth of students found that TMAs should include more collaborative activities, and 32% of students would occasionally like to receive feedback from peers - as well as from the tutor (ibid, p12). This resonates well with related research which focused on the nature and quality of peer feedback among students. Here, Mirabelle Walker found that while the quality of feedback generally was good, there was reluctance among students in her sample to use peer feedback, as students did not feel that they had developed the capacity to review the work of their peers competently (Walker 2013, p246).

4.2 OU staff

This section is largely based on findings presented in the report ‘Assessment: Practice and Promise’, written in 2014 by Denise Whitelock and Simon Cross (who also co-authored the report which the previous section drew on). Combining findings from the OU Staff Survey, the OU Associate Deans Survey, and the External Examiner Survey, and an OU Student Survey, the report draws on data from a range of different sources.

Views concerning assessment and feedback are contrasted in the synthesis of the report. While 81% of OU staff and 88% of student ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed somewhat’ that ‘students are given sufficient information about the assessment criteria, 53% of OU staff ‘agreed’ or ‘agreed somewhat’ that ‘students are given sufficient guidance within the module about how to use feedback and personal reflection’ (Whitelock and Cross 2014, p34).

Interestingly, it was statements relating to how OU responds to student experiences that scored the lowest. This include the following statements: ‘There is adequate monitoring of how student experience assessment’ – with just 25% of OU staff agreeing or agreeing somewhat that this is OU practice; ‘Student performance is reviewed early on in a module’s lifetime and used to enhance teaching’ - 21% of OU staff agree, or agree somewhat that this is OU practice (ibid, p34).

A range of comments were collected in relation to monitoring and feedback: ‘getting more detailed student or tutor feedback and using it,’ ‘by improving the quality and quantity of student feedback data and using this more effectively to improve assessment,’ ‘finding out and responding to student experiences of assessment,’ ‘working with ALs to find out what works best...,’ ‘collate more feedback from students and ALs,’ ‘data-mining and [using] to inform the setting (and potentially the re-design) of future assessment),’ ‘explore how assessment can support what it purports to do,’ (Whitelock and Cross 2014, p9).

One concern is, however, how well these results reflect the actual teaching experiences. With Module Chairs and Academic Authors totalling more than half of all OU staff participating in the survey, only 6.35% of respondents (#=12) were working in AL roles. It can thus be argued that the views from the coalface of teaching/learning are under-represented (ibid, p5).

5.0 Identifying good practice

Interestingly, Associate Deans were considerable more positive in their assessment than OU staff.
This section identifies and outlines examples of good feedback practice from across the resources provided by the OU Assessment Bank and Scholarship Exchange. The outline is divided into two subsections: Tutor-student feedback dynamics; peer review and student collaboration as part of assessment practice. Short outlines of the actual practices are provided in the accompanying textboxes.

5.1 Tutor-student feedback dynamics

A move towards a better understanding of student uptake of feedback was made in the 2009 study titled ‘Improved learning through improved feedback on assignments’, carried out by the Centre for Open Learning of Mathematics, Science, Computing and Technology. The nature of feedback and student responses across three technology modules were analysed, 106 assignments with a total of 3000 comments, and subsequently 47 students were interviewed (Walker 2009): ‘At the end of the interview, students were asked what sort of comment they would like to ask their tutor for, if given the opportunity. Two themes emerged strongly. One was that they wished to be told what they had got wrong, and why, and how to do better. It should be noted that the ‘why’ indicates a wish for an explanation. The other was that they would appreciate being given things to work on or watch out for in future assignments, or just receiving general suggestions for their future assignments’ (Walker 2009). Both themes relate to what Walker refers to as ‘gap-altering feedback’, of respectively retrospective and forward-facing nature (ibid).

On module E112, outlined below, students are required to reflect and comment on tutor feedback from the previous assignment is part of the requirement for TMA02, weighing in at 30 marks. While encouraging the student to engage with the feedback, this also provides the tutor with an improved understanding of how the feedback is digested. What is not clear from assessment submission is whether this practice forms part of a broader assessment strategy – pursued on more assignments within the same module, and/or on additional modules within the same faculty.

Textbox 1 E112 Checking students understanding of TMA feedback

In the second TMA on E112, students are asked to reflect on written feedback from TMA01. Students are asked to write a commentary explaining why they have made changes and how these changes improve the work. This helps ALs establish whether the student is able to process written feedback from TMA01 and act upon this feedback to produce improved work. It prompts ALs to consider feedback and language used (Pinchbeck 2013).

Along a similar vein, and developed in the same faculty, is the broader invitation to a student-led dialogue between student and tutor, as summarised in textbox 2. While anchored in a specific TMA task, the emphasis on dialogue also matched the learning outcomes of the module, with focus on ‘understanding of how and why we learn’. The EXCF224 assessment strategy aims to open up for a student-tutor dialogue about which part of the module/assignment the student was in need of help for (Pinchbeck, no date).

Textbox 2 EXCF224 Open dialogue – encouraging and improving student-tutor communication

In the context of a module titled ‘Making your coaching certificate count’, this formative compulsory TMA series focuses on AL feedback to develop student’s knowledge and understanding of the module materials and concepts presented, as well as the student’s ability to reflect upon this and apply the theory to their own coaching/instructing practice. For example, Task 3 in TMA 1 aims to open dialogue with the tutor on what aspects of the module/TMA the student requires further support improving communication between student and tutor (Pinchbeck, no date).

5 The idea carried out in the A226 Post Launch Review Report, it is an inter-active, computer-monitored assessment (iCMA). While the Assessment Bank Submission states that ‘Tutors are not involved in the marking of this aspect of the assessment’ (Clarke, no date), it is not clear if the tutor is allowed access to the audits in order to tailor interventions that meet identified needs.
The formative nature of the TMA did, however, prove a challenge. A 2015 review of EXCF224 found that students lacked motivation due to the formative nature of the TMAs. While compulsory, they did not contribute to the final module score, and were thus given low priority by the students. The assessment strategy was therefore changed from the 16B presentation, making TMA01 and TMA02 summative, and comprising 50% of the module result.

A similar objective, focusing on student uptake and response to feedback, was pursued in the Feedback-on-Feedback (F/F) project, using Jing recordings (Fernandez-Toro et al. 2014). Implemented on language modules, the project addressed two pedagogic issues: Students’ engagement with the feedback they receive on assignments; students’ ability to engage in knowledge construction through effective use of assessment feedback (ibid).

Textbox 3 The feedback-on-feedback project

Using student-generated Jing recordings, students were asked to talk through the feedback written by their tutors on one of their assignments, or in other words, give feedback on the feedback. Six tutors were invited to ask a selection of their students to record their responses to the feedback given on one TMA.

Whereas tutors overall were more enthusiastic than the students, project findings demonstrate that F/F can work as an effective method to enhance the quality of the feedback in the assessment process, thereby ideally also improving students’ learning experience. Emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that the feedback dialogue is a two-way process: Through the use of F/F, tutors gain a better insight into the ways in which students perceive, interpret and use the feedback they write. However students also need to understand that the very process of talking through their tutors’ feedback is just as important as a learning activity for themselves.  

Overall, the experience of students having taking part in the peer-feedback exercise is more positive than what is suggested in the SEFAR report (p7 in this report) where students generally were dismissive of audio recordings as an option for assessment feedback (without having experienced it, however). It can be speculated that familiarisation makes the students more comfortable with the process of audio feedback.

While novel in an OU context, the use of audio recordings for feedback was mentioned by at least six respondents in the ‘Assessment: Practice and Promise’ report previously referred to. As one respondent noted, “I think we should definitely be considering feedback in other modes - e.g. use of short audios plus screen casts - which is being tried in other UK contexts and in the US. This hugely increases the amount of valuable feedback which can be given in the time available. It can be accompanied by short written comments which help students to revise, and/or with a group feedback sheet which details learning points which could be useful for the entire group (Whitelock and Cross, 2014, p13).

5.2 Peer feedback and peer review

Peer review has been defined as ‘arrangements whereby students evaluate and make judgements about the work of their peers and construct a written feedback commentary’ (Nicol 2014). Whereas peer review holds a specific meaning when submitting for academic journals, the term nevertheless works better than ‘peer assessment’ in a teaching context, with the latter term interpreted as summative.

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6 I am grateful to Jessica Pinchbeck, E112 & EXCF224 Chair, for this update.
7 Jing® , a free software tool, allows the recording of a five-minute video commentary of what is happening on a computer screen, i.e. to make a screencast. Screencasts have been widely used as a teaching tool offering generic explanations to student cohorts. According to research, students found the explanations clear and were able to appreciate the underlying principles, due to the step-by-step explication. Some students found them superior to face to face presentations in as much as they could rewind, pause and watch again later. Using screencasts to provide individual feedback on student assessments, however, is a relatively new area of research, and few studies have thus far been conducted (Harper et al 2012)
Whereas OU’s assessment principles state that “Students should be given opportunities to engage in and develop their skills in peer review and self assessment”, this contrasts the assertion of Peter Taylor, Director of Assessment, that ‘we haven’t got a great history of using peer learning within the university’ (Taylor 2014). While the comment was made as part of an introduction to a workshop on peer learning, with examples from within the OU (DD313, SD815, L161), they contrasted anecdotal evidence pointing to the long-standing experiences with peer learning within the Faculty for Mathematics, Computing and Technology (MCT). As there is little evidence of these experiences in the Assessment Hub, this first and foremost points to a need for more effective structures for cross-university sharing of learning modalities.

Recent OU scholarship on peer review includes Maple and Parsons’ work on the formative peer assessment, based on the experiences of students and tutors. Whereas findings pointed to experiences of uncertainty and anxiety associated with working outside the comfort zone, the process was nevertheless viewed as positive, helpful and developmental. The authors draw together the main pedagogic elements:

‘Having the responsibility of reviewing someone else’s work engenders two important pedagogic purposes: 1. It brings students together in a shared responsibility for each other’s learning. Where collaborative practice is established earlier in a module, this can further help with creating an effective learning community; 2. By better ensuring students read the criteria by which they and their peers are assessed, deeper insights into what the module is trying to achieve and deeper understanding of the learning process, are achieved, thus moving the student further towards independent learning. In our view the further facilitation of a learning community and better engendering independent learning skills are the most powerful arguments for undertaking the peer review process’ (Maples and Parsons 2014, p3).

Following on, Maples and Parsons recommend a wider take up of peer review within the OU, arguing that peer reviews will enable students to become parts of learning communities in their field, thus ‘moulding their ways of learning towards independent methods’. Recommending the piloting of peer reviewing on at least one Level 1 module, across different faculties, they argue that the introduction of peer reviewing at an early stage means that students are more likely to incorporate the lessons learned into their own practice and carry them forward as they move up the levels of undergraduate study (p4). Furthermore, interaction through peer feedback can add to a sense of belonging and thus foster a sense of community among students (Chetwynd et al, no date, p8).

Similar concerns around a sense of community among students, and the introduction of peer review at an early stage of the module was central on A863 (see textbox). Furthermore, the exercise also served to plant the idea of the tutor group forum as a platform for dialogue and interaction.

**Textbox 4  Reflection and forum use on A863**

Based on an awareness that some students were less comfortable with online modes of communication, the first TMA asked the students to post a short piece on the tutor group forum and, in turn, comment on two or three stories which other students had written, as well as responding to comments made by other students. Students were then asked to write a 1000 word reflective piece on how they went about the exercise, and how they felt about the process.

On the forums there was initially some concern about ‘exposing’ one’s work to other students. Overall, the experiences were, however, largely positive – as noted by one tutor:

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9 Comment made at the opening of workshop on peer learning, November 2015. Please see Chetwynd et al (no date) for a thorough review of literature on the use of peer assessment in distance teaching.

10 I am grateful to Katharine Jewitt for sharing her insights.

'When I read the work on the forums, I was most impressed at the enthusiasm and the sheer range of stories the students had identified. Their comments on each other’s posts were courteous, supportive and also, where appropriate, critical. When I then read the samples of the reflective piece submitted for monitoring, it was clear that for many students this began as a daunting exercise but they then enjoyed it.'

The DD313 Peer Review exercise is a recent, well-documented example of peer-review, with the key steps summarised in the textbox below. Participation in the exercise was compulsory for completion of Part 2 of TMA03 which asks students to reflect on the process, and it carried 25% of the marks for TMA03 (though their actual comments to other students were not in themselves assessed). The exercise uses the Moodle Workshop tool (the first OU module to do this, though some non-live pilot work has been tried). The tool provides a platform for students to submit plans anonymously. It then allocates plans to reviewers automatically and delivers review comments back to the student authors anonymously.

Textbox 5  DD313 key steps

1. Students write a draft outline for their TMA03 report according to a provided template and submit it to the Workshop tool.
2. Students review and comment qualitatively according to specified criteria, on 3 plans of fellow student’s work;
3. Students receive comments on their own plans from fellow students;
4. Students reflect on the pros and cons of the exercise and how they adapted their plans for TMA03 in the light of comments received.

(Brown 2015)

When asked to judge the pedagogic/skills development value of the peer review exercise in this presentation, one of the participating tutors commented:

‘The first is that students must very consciously place themselves into an unfamiliar environment. This, inevitably, focuses the mind. Adding a bit of pressure over and above what they would otherwise have felt (in the course of a ‘normal’ TMA submission) is a good way, I think, of taking our responsibilities to prepare students for working environments seriously.

Requiring students to comment constructively, coherently and, above all, professionally on the work of a peer is a fantastic learning experience. Is this the ‘Yang’ to the ‘Yin’ of self-reflection? Students invariably found this challenging. Most appreciated the opportunity and some intensely disliked it (as the comments in your collection attest). To get students to think differently is, however, the Holy Grail of teaching, and this kind of exercise does that.’ (Hayman, P., in Brown 2015, p29).

While not directly related to assessment, E207 (Textbox below) provides an example of student collaboration on an online module. The module was, overall, well received, as evidenced in generally high levels of student satisfaction: 93.5% satisfied with the quality of the module, 91.4% satisfied with their study experience, 91.3% said engaging in collaborative activities helped them learn (Henry, no date).

Textbox 6  Collaborative learning

E207 is a wholly-online module in which students work closely together in small e-groups of 4 or 5 students. The students work collaboratively to research, evaluate and share internet sites that could be used to develop their own subject-knowledge or enhance children’s enjoyment and engagement with science & technology. The project is also designed to support the development of key skills including the ability to: Apply ICT in order to find, use and share information accurately; critically analyse information in regard to quality, reliability, subject-knowledge and pedagogy; learn from the diverse experience, interests and insights of peers; develop team-working skills; draft, review and develop collaborative documents (Henry, no date).
6.0 Conclusion
This report has aimed to identify documented examples of good practice regarding assessment feedback within the OU. It is based on material made available through the OU Assessment Hub and Scholarship Exchange.

In line with the OU assessment principles, focus has in particular been on feedback as a relational, dialogic process with emphasis on learning rather than measurement, very much in line with the broader principles of assessment as contributing to ‘...the development of self-regulated, reflexive, independent learners’ (1). Referencing Principles 5 & 6, the selection of practices have, in particular been informed by the aim to ‘... position students as active learners, encourage[ing] productive, reflective knowledge building’ (5), and ‘...provide opportunities to engage in and develop their skills in peer review and self-assessment’ (6).

But based on the material provided, it can be difficult to make the leap from the explained practice to an understanding of the broader strategy. In OU assessment policy guidelines, an assessment strategy is an explicit requirement (Principle 2) as well as an implicit guidance, as expressed in the understanding of feedback as one step in an AL-student dialogue. Most examples of good practice are, however, specific interventions, restricted to one assignment, or parts there-of, and only the assessment policy guidelines form the Social Science Faculty presents a strategy that also outlines assessment criteria in relation to specific Study Levels.

There is, at the same time, a well-documented student demand for improved tutor-student communication around assessment feedback, as well an understanding among OU staff that student experiences of assessment feedback remains inadequately monitored.

The examples of good practice that were collected, focused on tutor-student dialogue around assessment feedback and the use of peer review for assessment purposes. This included ‘low-tech’ examples where student response to feedback was a assignment requirement, as well as the use of screen casts to gather responses. Similarly, different Virtual Learning Tools – like the tutor group forum and the Workshop Tool – were an integrated part of peer learning. It was suggested that the use Peer review/learning is new to the OU. Evidence of inter-faculty differences in the use of peer review practices as part of the pedagogic toolbox would, however, point to the need for a more systematic gathering of peer review experiences from across the university.

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Appendix 1  Principles of OU assessment policy

PRINCIPLE 1
In a distance learning environment the primary purpose of module assessment should be support of student learning and the development of self-regulated reflexive independent learners.

PRINCIPLE 2
All qualifications should have an assessment strategy articulating the approach to assessment across the qualification. All modules should have an assessment strategy outlining the relationship between learning and assessment in the module including the key purpose of each assessment opportunity.

PRINCIPLE 3
Assessment is a core element of learning design. It should be scheduled to support consistent progression and pace of learning through the module and qualification. It should be explicit to students that they are expected to undertake all assessment opportunities in a module unless choice of assessment tasks is an integral part of the assessment design.

PRINCIPLE 4
Module (or Qualification) teams are expected to set a clear framework for tuition related to the assessment and to engage with Associate Lecturers around assessment - the design, delivery and marking of assessment tasks.

PRINCIPLE 5
Feedback is an integral part of assessment and can drive student behaviour. It should be given on all assessments, including exams to support students in moving forward to their next module or formal learning experience. Feedback should position students as active learners, encourage productive reflective knowledge building, offer students opportunities for dialogue around their learning and facilitate future learning.

PRINCIPLE 6
Students should be given opportunities to engage in and develop their skills in peer review and self-assessment.

PRINCIPLE 7
Criteria for assessing each assignment should be explicit and transparent to students.
Annexe 2  Social Sciences Faculty Assessment Policy

Level 1 – Policy

Assessment should engage students in academic conventions and build academic literacy by practising and developing skills across a series of assessments.

Assessment should enable students to produce structured academic writing in their own words with reference to suitable sources of information and ideas.

Assessment should require the student to show they can undertake basic arithmetical and/or statistical calculations and understand how they can be used in social sciences.

Reflection on progress and achievement in assignments should get students to engage with and internalise academic criteria better to close the gap between a student’s current performance and where s/he need to be. This should involve ‘showing not telling’ by exposure to relevant exemplars/marked samples of good to weak performance, etc.

Serial assessments should be designed as a vehicle for students to develop familiarity with online environments for accessing information.

Assessment should require a participatory element so that students learn together and from interaction with each other.

Assessment needs to enable students to recognise and articulate the relevance of knowledge and skills learned in modules to non-academic contexts such as the workplace, public settings or social organisations.

Students should be assessed on their ability to learn independently in a developmental way across a module with direct assessment of their independent learning skills at the end of DD102 and then at a higher Level at the end of Stage 1 to prepare them for the demands of Level 2.

Level 2 – Policy

Assessment should require collaborative practice (team working).

Students should undertake assessment in a genre/format that is suitable to a workplace environment, public setting or social organisation, demonstrating ability to use skills and knowledge in communicating to a non-academic audience.

Assessment should develop and test students’ ability to select, read and interpret material from a range of sources found independently of module materials. Where relevant, these might include significant articles or chapters written by social scientists or government literature, public reports, etc. In some disciplines, such as Economics and the applied parts of Psychology, this will be less important, as ‘independent learning’ will instead be manifested by students practising and mastering technical aspects of their discipline taught by the module.

Modules must make clear to students the purpose of the Examination pedagogy in relation to the learning outcomes and overall assessment strategy, and explicitly teach the material in ways appropriate to the Examination method\(^\text{12}\).

Modules must coach students at a suitable time for the particular discipline and demands of working in exam conditions so as to provide maximum support for exam success\(^\text{13}\).

Level 3 – Policy

Students should undertake substantial self-directed assessment (EMA) that engages directly with the process of identifying research problems and requires independent selection of relevant sources of data and materials for the task.

Assessment will require students to demonstrate their ability to evaluate and synthesise a diversity of research strategies and data for evidence including those informed by current developments relevant to the chosen research question, whether qualitative and/or quantitative.

\(^{12}\) An examination is a specific pedagogy and therefore the material that students will be examined on needs to be actively taught with that in mind.

\(^{13}\) This is not an assignment task but is a requirement to support good results and retention – it’s good practice to give students an opportunity to practice working under exam conditions, via, for example, a VLE timed exercise with content relevant to the module’s Exam.
Assessment should include a process of engaging in critical appraisal of others’ contributions via presentations to peers/participation in an online group, reflecting on and changing of own work accordingly, and in which each student can demonstrate the use of their own initiative to determine their objectives in seeking peer evaluation.

Assessment should allow students to practice the application of ‘graduate’ generic and/or subject skills to non-academic and employment-related contexts, for example, by anchoring assessment in real life scenarios, and to articulate the capacities developed in terms that make sense to an employer.
Report Author:

Katharine Jewitt, Associate Lecturer and Consultant
k.jewitt@open.ac.uk
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