



# Managing Assessment

Student and Staff Perspectives

## **Managing Assessment: Student and Staff Perspectives**

Published by The Higher Education Academy in partnership with the University of Central England in Birmingham

The Higher Education Academy  
Innovation Way  
York Science Park  
Heslington  
York  
United Kingdom  
YO1 5BR

Tel +44 (0)1904 717500  
[enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk)

**[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)**

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# Introduction

## **'I never realised assessment was for learning'**

Laura Ludman

BSc (Hons) Nursing, University of Central England

*Managing Assessment: Student and Staff Perspectives* is a practical tool developed by the Managing Effective Student Assessment (MESA) benchmarking club. It aims to give senior management, staff and educational developers, teachers, and support staff insight into assessment issues along with ideas and tools to enable them to improve student learning and reduce the burden on staff. It is hoped that, as well as enriching the learning experience, the case studies will also encourage students to reflect on their experiences of assessment and promote student and staff dialogue around assessment practices.

The underlying principle of the Managing Effective Student Assessment (MESA) benchmarking club was the emphasis and value placed on the student perspective. However, it was recognised that assessment is complex and needs careful management. This includes appropriate strategies, structures and support to ensure effective student learning. The initiative was led by the Higher Education Academy (formerly the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre) and University of Central England (UCE) with the aim of refocusing staff time into providing better support for students and making student learning more effective. The MESA group comprised of a senior manager at departmental level, a member of the educational/faculty development staff and up to three students from each of eight institutions: the UCE, University of Brighton,

Coventry University, De Montfort University, University of Glamorgan, Northumbria University, University of Sussex, and York St John College. The students and staff involved were from a range of different discipline areas and diverse institutions.

The aims of the MESA group were to:

- Share effective practices and issues in assessment;
- Use assessment to enrich the student learning experience and seek to demystify assessment;
- Enhance assessment practice to improve student retention and progression;
- Manage change effectively and embed within institutions.

The active involvement of students was facilitated through a student discussion forum which ran parallel to the inputs made by academic managers. The students were invited to discuss experiences of good assessment practice and identify assessment related issues that impacted on their experiences. The group then worked together to seek effective resolutions to the issues raised, which led to the creation of the case studies presented in this publication.

The MESA project encouraged students and staff to learn from one

another, as well as learning across subject boundaries and types of institutions. *Managing Assessment: Student and Staff Perspectives* was created in order to share this learning and to help others develop their understanding of what students need from assessment. It also considers how change can be managed and embedded within institutions.

# About the contributors

**Sharni Armstrong** is a DipHE Nursing student at the University of Brighton and is Chair of the Student Council.

**Sue Bernhauser** is currently Head of the Institute of Nursing and Midwifery, Assistant Dean of the Faculty of Health at the University of Brighton and Vice Chair of the Council of Deans of Nursing and Health Professions (currently Acting Chair). She has been in Nurse Education for 20 years and has nursing experience in both general and learning disability nursing. Her main academic interests are around leadership in Higher Education.

**Dr Stuart Brand** is the Associate Dean (Academic) in the Faculty of Health and Community Care at the University of Central England in Birmingham. Stuart's background is in teaching physiology to health care students. More recently the main focus of his work has been to improve the student experience within the Faculty through enhancing the effectiveness of learning, teaching and assessment. He is now steering the UCE Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning which is focused upon the development of learning partnerships with health and social care employers.

**Steve Bound** is a DipHE Nursing student at the University of Brighton.

**Helen Brown** was a BSc (Hons) Nursing student at the University of Central England who has since graduated and is now employed within a local NHS Trust. She maintains links with the University through its Link Teaching Initiative.

**Laila Burton** is a Project Officer at the Higher Education Academy. In this role, Laila is involved in the work of the MESA group and other projects aimed at sharing and embedding effective assessment practice.

**Julia Casson** is an undergraduate studying Media and Cultural Studies. Julia got involved in the project through links with the Students' Union at the University of Sussex.

**Sue Clayton** is a Development Officer in the Teaching and Learning Development Unit at the University of Sussex. She convenes the Unit's taught programmes (PGCertHE and Associate Tutors Programme) and works with academic departments across the university in a quality enhancement role, to develop and support approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Her particular interest is in the impact of initial teacher training and CPD on teaching practice. Sue is currently working to develop and implement the university's strategy linked to the 'Supporting Professional Standards Initiative'.

**Teresa Comba** is a principal lecturer in the Institute of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Brighton. Currently, Teresa is course leader for the MA in Nursing Studies and the Postgraduate Certificate in Health and Social Care Education (PgCHSCE) and so has a keen interest in assessment, especially of nursing practice. Teresa has really valued her involvement with the MESA project as it has enabled assessment to emerge as a true learning experience for students, lecturers and managers alike.

**Professor Diana Eastcott** is a Professor and Director of the Staff and Student Development Department at the University of Central England in Birmingham. Diana is a staff and educational developer with many years' experience as an institutional manager, course leader, facilitator and teacher. Her main focus is on promoting initiatives that have a significant impact on improving the quality of student learning.

**Linda France** is currently a second year nursing student at the University of Brighton. Linda has a background in Education Development, having worked as a Development Officer at the University of Sussex and as a Research Assistant. In addition, Linda has enjoyed a Student Union Sabbatical at the University of Brighton.

**Nik Goldberg** recently graduated from the University of Sussex with BA in Philosophy and English Literature. Nik was involved throughout his degree with the Students' Union as a Course Representative and as a Sabbatical Officer. He has always considered the student voice to be one of the most influential forces for change in education. Nik enjoyed being able to put 'his voice' to good effect and found the levels of contribution and interest enormously encouraging in meetings and in his studies.

**Elizabeth Grant** was a Teaching Fellow in the Coventry School of Art and Design, Coventry University, and a project manager for staff development activities for the Higher Education Academy's Art Design and Media Subject Centre. Elizabeth has worked in higher, further, adult and prison education. She researched and developed rehabilitation programmes for custodial offenders and became the Chair of the National Association for the Education and Guidance of Offenders. Elizabeth's current interest is in the development of culturally empathetic learning, teaching and assessment methods in higher education. She now works in the Staff

Development Centre at the University of Leicester.

**Lee Hall** recently joined Coventry University as Senior Lecturer after twenty years in the automotive industry. Lee became involved in MESA as his School's Teaching Fellow. Lee enjoyed learning from the MESA experience and in particular, the reflective approach to assessment.

**Sarah Hudson** is a recently qualified nursing diploma student. During her time as a student she was Chair of the nursing and midwifery student council for Brighton University. This role enabled Sarah to join the MESA group, as it was important to have a student view on assessment.

**Christopher Leno** is an Art and Design student from Coventry University and played an active role in the student group.

**Laura Ludman** was a BSc (Hons) Nursing student at the University of Central England who has since graduated and is now employed within a local NHS Trust.

**Luke Millard** is the Associate Registrar (Quality Enhancement) in the Faculty of Health and Community Care at the University of Central England. Luke is also a Learning and Teaching Fellow in the Faculty and acted as co-ordinator for the MESA project. He has recently been appointed Project Manager for Learning and Teaching with specific responsibility for the University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

**Nita Muir** is currently a Senior Lecturer in nursing at the University of Brighton. Previous to this role Nita was clinically based and has worked both in the United Kingdom and in the United States. Nita received her

MSc in Community Nursing from South Bank University, during which time she practised as a specialist practitioner in district nursing. Nita's teaching and learning interests are varied and include inter-professional education, research, professional nursing, and facilitating cultural exchange.

**Steve Neep** is a third year nursing diploma student, serving in the army. Steve is a student representative for his group, which was his doorway into the MESA group. Steve is studying at the University of Central England, Birmingham and is posted in the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine. Steve joined the group in December and helped feed back scenarios, criticisms, worries and anecdotes from fellow students through to the steering group.

**Susan Orr** is a principal lecturer with responsibility for quality management and enhancement in the School of Arts at York St John College. Susan is responsible for developing and implementing strategies to improve the quality of the students' learning experience. Susan is a published researcher focusing on higher education pedagogy and her interests include: assessment as a social practice; students' approaches to textual and visual assessment; retention and widening participation.

**Eloise Phillips** is a graduate in nursing from the University of Central England, Birmingham. She has been a student representative at the University for the duration of her course and enjoys having an input into all endeavours that seek to improve the student experience.

**Dr Roy Seden**, a structural engineer by discipline, was a Principal Lecturer in the Centre for Learning and Teaching at De Montfort University. Roy has had particular responsibility for co-ordinating the University Teacher Fellowship Scheme and for supporting aspects of assessment policy and

practice. Roy's current research interests include dispersed professional development and teaching excellence in practice. He has recently been appointed as Quality Enhancement Manager at the University of Derby.

**Kay Slade** became involved in MESA through being a Student Representative at the University of Central England in Birmingham for a group of 70 students on a third year nursing diploma course. Initially, Kay was asked to identify student problems with assessment, so rather than just using her own experiences she approached the students in her groups for their feedback. She fed this information into the meetings, which has led to the development of this material.

**Joanne Smailes** is a Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator at Northumbria University. In this role, Joanne works with staff to address the diverse needs of the student group and to develop the use of assessment as a tool for enhancing learning. Prior to her current job, Joanne was an academic in Newcastle's Business School, specialising in business modelling.

**Professor Brenda Smith** is an Associate Director at the Higher Education Academy and was the former Head of the LTSN Generic Centre (now part of the Academy). Brenda works at national level with key stakeholder groups such as the UK funding bodies, QAA, staff and educational developers, senior managers and the 24 subject centres. She has given keynotes internationally, facilitated workshops, and written widely on learning and teaching. She has a particular interest in assessment and in the active involvement of students.

**Neill Thew** is Head of the Teaching and Learning Development Unit at the University of Sussex where he is responsible for the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy and for a team of colleagues. He was pleased to be

involved with the MESA project because a substantial programme of redesigning assessment has been – and continues to be – a key development area at Sussex. Neill's own research and consultancy activities focus on embedding changes through understanding departmental cultures – improving student learning through assessment design and blended learning.

## Acknowledgement

The group would like to thank the students involved in the project for their enthusiasm and invaluable contribution and wishes them all the best for the future.

Thanks also go to Susan Orr and Joanne Smailes for helping to edit and produce *Managing Assessment: Student and Staff Perspectives*. Also to the following staff and students who contributed to the work of the group: John Davies, Rita Doerner, Robert Edwards, Bob Farmer, David Green, Danny Saunders, Andy Smith and Keith Smith.

Finally thanks go to Professor Diana Eastcott, Dr Stuart Brand and Luke Millard from the University of Birmingham for having a 'gem' of an idea.

Professor Brenda Smith  
The Higher Education Academy

# Case studies

The MESA group separated into parallel student and staff forums to discuss examples of good assessment practice and explore the key issues impacting on the assessment of learning. Students and staff then worked collaboratively to discuss the issues from the student perspective and the teacher/institution perspective and to seek effective resolutions to the matters raised. The outcome from these workshops was a range of case studies based on the topics raised by the students. The input from students led to the creation of highly creative and sometimes humorous scenarios. The resulting publication reflects 'real' students, and the personal circumstances portrayed in this publication are critical to understanding and contextualising the assessment issue and to engaging students.

## Using the publication as a practical resource

The case studies have been presented in the following format with each case spread over two pages. Page one provides the scenario and has sections for recording thoughts and suggestions about the possible issues for both the student and the institution. Page two provides further contextual information and learning points for consideration. There is also a section for comments and reflections about the key points emerging.

The case studies have been designed as a tool that can be adapted and utilised in different ways. The MESA group has developed the following three examples of how the case studies can be used.

### Example 1

**Individual or small group activity using the case studies.** The first page of each case is read and commented upon using the blank 'Student issues' and 'Institution issues' sections before referring to the contextual information on the second page. The comments, reflections and suggestions made can then be reviewed in the light of the extra information provided before any conclusions are drawn and the 'Key Learning Points' section is completed.

### Example 2

**Workshop activity for use with students, staff or mixed groups.** In small groups, one person acts as the student, another as the tutor and the third as the observer. (A fourth person acting in a management role is optional.) Further information about the workshop activity can be found on pages **31–36**.

### Example 3

**Individual or small group activity for discussion around the cycle of assessment.** Further information about this activity can be found on pages 37–39.

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# Case Study I – The diversity of assessment

Stuart is currently on the first year of a modular degree programme and has to study ten modules over the year. Although he is only half way through the academic year, Stuart feels as if he has come across every assessment method in the world. For instance, for one of the year-long modules he is required to build a portfolio; in the statistics module he has to undergo regular computer-aided assessment; for one of the strategy modules he has to do a presentation on video, as well as create a poster based on some group work. In one of his optional modules, the module leader, drawing upon popular media culture, randomly allocated small groups to take part in a quiz – based on ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ – at the start of each seminar.

The method by which Stuart achieved his assessments also varied. For the poster group work, the students were allowed to select their own groups and Stuart opted to join with his slightly wayward friends. In contrast, for the quiz he was allocated to a group which included two Chinese students and a Cypriot. During this exercise, Stuart seemed to spend most of his time describing the concept of the show, ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ to the international students.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

# Case Study I – The diversity of assessment

## Contextual information: student

Stuart is 18 and has dyslexia. Up until now he has led a quiet life as the son of a croft farmer on the Isle of Skye. He is a studious and intelligent lad, but rather naive for his age and tends to be easily led. He really struggles with the group work. When he is with his friends they end up doing anything **but** work, but when he was with the international students there just seemed to be either long periods of uncomfortable silence or he was repeatedly explaining the rules of 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?'. Because of this, he can't help but feel that he did all the work.

Stuart feels as if his degree programme is in the middle of some sort of academic experiment. He feels as if any skills learnt in the assessment methods are not transferable across to other activities. He never thought he would say this, given his dyslexia, but he is longing to do a 3,000-word essay.

## Contextual information: institution

Last academic year, the School was subject to an institutional audit. One of the criticisms arising related to the lack of variety in assessment methods across the programme. The reviewers felt that too much reliance was placed on the essay as an assessment method. This academic year the school is undergoing rationalisation of their modules. For each module, the School has asked module leaders to ensure contact hours are reduced to maximum of two per week. Additionally, module leaders were asked, in light of the audit recommendation, to review their assessment methods for the current academic year. Although the School did arrange for staff development sessions on assessment innovation, module tutors worked autonomously in applying any changes to their module.

To follow up, the School's Dean reviewed student module feedback and, ironically, the module which received the most positive feedback was the one that had not had any changes made to the assessment strategy.

## Learning points to consider:

- Did pressure of rationalisation and innovation lead to a lack of programme cohesion?
- How are students informed about the development of transferable skills at a programme level?
- Should academic tutors facilitate or influence group-work dynamics?

## Key points emerging:

## Case Study 2 – Innovation for innovation's sake

Talullah is in her final year of study. Up until now most of her assignments were either seminar presentations or 3,000 word essays. Over the summer, the decision was made to introduce problem-based learning (PBL) across the programme. As a result, the timetable has changed beyond recognition. Until now, the delivery pattern was fairly standard: lectures for around 100 students and seminar sessions in groups of 20. Previously, contact time with lecturers was around 14 hours per week. Talullah is now required to attend for 24 hours per week with the majority of this time (20 hours) spent in a student-led group with 8 other students. Tuesday afternoons are completely dedicated to skills sessions which are the only regular weekly contact the group has with lecturers. (The lecturers attend student-led groups on a piecemeal basis.)

Assessment for the final year, apart from the dissertation, is based on the PBL approach and includes peer-assessed presentations, a one-to-one tutor viva and some observation. Talullah and her friends (who are now in other groups) have been chatting and it would appear that for both the student and tutor-led sessions they appear to have had completely different experiences.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

## Case Study 2 – Innovation for innovation's sake

### Contextual information: student

Talullah is very worried, for although she is a local student she has to support herself through part-time work. She has a long-term work commitment on Tuesday afternoons, which cannot be altered without losing her job. As a result, she has to miss the majority of the skills workshops. Her impression is that this is the only time when she is 'taught'. She is already feeling very stressed about her dissertation. Although it makes a nice change not to have to do essays, the amount of work generated by the PBL is further undermining her confidence. She knows that many of her friends are in a similar situation and feel the same way.

They have reported this to their student programme representative to bring up at the next programme committee. However, they are doubtful that their concerns will be fully reported, especially as they have found out that the student programme representative is a real fan of PBL. In fact his father, who is a lecturer, is one of the leading academics in the field of PBL.

### Contextual information: institution

Last academic year, a new member of staff was recruited into the department. This staff member had vast experience of PBL and the school was very keen to utilise her experience. The staff member was therefore immediately appointed as a programme leader and asked to introduce PBL. Meetings were held with management/student representatives to discuss its introduction, but only selected teaching staff members were involved in the discussions. Unfortunately, this has led to some resentment amongst other teaching staff who do not feel they were party to any of the decision making. One or two feel very unconfident about marking based on observations as this is very unfamiliar practice to them. Others are quite enthusiastic about the approach, particularly as they believe it has helped reduce the marking load. Generally, staff are so embroiled about their own concerns that, as yet, no-one has approached the students to ask them about their experience.

### Learning points to consider:

- At what stage should innovation be introduced into the programme?
- What are the training needs associated with innovation?
- What workload considerations are there?
- When do you engage students in the process?

### Key points emerging:

## Case Study 3 – Diligent or difficult?

After nine years service, Jason has left the army and has chosen to study for a degree. He is completely self-funded and generally keeps himself to himself. However, during his first year he regularly voiced his opinion on various issues surrounding the curriculum. He managed, for example, to negotiate changes to the first year assessment deadlines. As a result, in the second year, his fellow students have elected him as the programme's student representative.

The programme is currently undergoing revalidation and Jason is very keen to raise issues surrounding assessment such as:

- the removal of examination resits
- changes in the timing of assignments
- free choice in assignment topics
- free choice in assessment format e.g. video, presentation etc.
- removal of peer assessment
- freedom to challenge marking criteria used
- the list goes on and on . . .

In the validation process, use is also being made of the external examiner reports. Last year, one external examiner report commended the programme for its clarity in relation to assessment and pointed out that they had no wish to see the use of so called "free choice" in assessment.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

## Case Study 3 – Diligent or difficult?

### Contextual information: student

During Jason's time in the army he served in Iraq, Ireland and Bosnia and he has been deeply affected by this experience. He is so meticulously tidy and obsessive about cleanliness that he has become unpopular with fellow residents. He is impatient with the seemingly casual attitude of academic staff and fellow students to higher education and he has been known to have a quick temper if he doesn't get his own way.

That said, given his meticulous nature, he has ensured that he carried out his responsibilities as a student representative diligently and he has fully consulted the student group as part of the validation process.

### Contextual information: institution

Programme staff are very keen to take on board the student perspectives and many of them believe that some of the suggestions – for example, increasing choice in the format of the assessment – are quite innovative. Indeed, a couple feel there would be an opportunity for a small grant to carry out pedagogical evaluation of the place of student choice in the curriculum. However, Jason has a 'reputation' amongst academic staff and they are unsure whether evidence presented by him is truly reflective of the group. Secondly, a number of the points raised cannot be accommodated within the current university regulations.

The Chair of the validating committee is a former colleague of the external examiner and it is common knowledge that there is great mutual respect between the two. As a consequence, there is enormous hidden pressure on staff to accommodate the external examiner's viewpoint.

### Learning points to consider

- How effective is communication with students about their role and the scope they have to suggest changes?
- How do you balance stakeholder needs and hidden agendas?
- Are the opinions of a student representative actually representative or are they based on the student representative's own views?

### Key points emerging:

## Case Study 4 – When is ‘good’ good?

Patrick is 28 and is currently on the second year of his degree programme. In his first year, Patrick was allocated a personal tutor whom he had found to be very considerate, obliging and inspiring. This successful relationship led to Patrick developing a boundless enthusiasm for his chosen subject and he enjoyed the first year enormously.

There were 200 students on the degree programme, which constituted a 50% increase on previous cohort numbers. Due to this rapid increase in student numbers the programme team introduced a pass/fail assessment for progression into year two, with percentage marks being allocated from year two onwards.

Patrick thought he had coped with the first year well, but now he is in the second year he is finding it much harder to cope with what appears to be a much heavier workload. However, he was delighted to find out that his personal tutor would also be his tutor for a lab-based experimental module in semester one.

The assignment for this module required students to produce a research report and Patrick has taken several opportunities to consult his personal tutor to get feedback on his progress to date. The tutor has been very encouraging and Patrick was often told that he was making excellent progress.

However, in semester two when his summative assessment is returned, Patrick is devastated when he receives a mark of 48% for the module.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

# Case Study 4 – When is ‘good’ good?

## Contextual information: student

Patrick’s mother and father were both strict disciplinarians. As a teenager he rebelled against this and he left school with few formal qualifications. Subsequently, Patrick tried and failed in a variety of business endeavours. This culminated in his declaring himself bankrupt. At this point Patrick was somewhat surprised to find a great deal of support from his parents. As a consequence, he is keen to start afresh. He completed a general access course at a local FE college before gaining a place on a psychology degree course.

At first, the high number of students on the course shocked him. As his parents had agreed to support him financially in his studies, he was very keen to do well. Patrick felt extremely lucky to have struck up a good rapport with his personal tutor and when he was told that his work was excellent he had assumed – and had expected to receive – a high mark.

## Contextual information: institution

Due to the size of the programme cohort, team teaching is commonplace on all modules. In the case of the experimental module there are six staff in total on the team. As all assignment marking is anonymous, the module tutor simply allocates marking randomly across the team. In Patrick’s case, this meant the assignment was marked by a lecturer who had no current or previous teaching contact with him.

Patrick’s personal tutor is delighted that he has shown so much interest in his studies but is aware that his enthusiasm often outstrips his ability. He thinks that Patrick was lucky to have progressed to year two of the programme.

Based on his profile to date, the guidance tutor was concerned that Patrick might fail but believed he should offer encouraging feedback at all times. He was therefore delighted to see him pass what is considered to be a challenging assignment.

## Learning points to consider:

- How might one go about giving praise while also being constructively critical and making students aware of their weaker areas?
- How can a balance be struck between the dual roles of lecturer/assessor and personal tutor?
- What are the implications of anonymous marking?

## Key points emerging:

## Case Study 5 – Consistency within creativity

Sonya is a 19 year-old student on a design-based arts degree programme in which many of the assignments are open ended.

Sonya is finding these open-ended briefs very difficult. When she asked her tutors about this she was told that this was simply the way that briefs are written. The tutors explained that the briefs needed to be open ended to allow students to be creative and innovative. When she asked to look at the work of last year's students to get an idea about what was expected, she was told that this was not possible because it might narrow and restrict her creativity.

In spite of all this Sonya still likes to know exactly what she is doing and gets anxious when the assignment requirements are unclear.

In the last assignment students were asked to carry out a marketing survey assessing customer demand for a named product. Sonya asked the part-time lecturer, who distributed the assignment, where concentration should be placed, i.e. design of the survey or evaluation of results. The lecturer advised that it would probably be the design. However, the following week in a seminar her regular full-time lecturer indicated that the emphasis should be placed on evaluation of results.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

## Case Study 5 – Consistency within creativity

### Contextual information: student

Sonya is an only child from a very wealthy family. She attended a traditional grammar school where assessment expectations were made very clear.

Although performing fairly well at school, Sonya is a fun-loving extrovert with an active social life. She embarked upon her course as she saw it as an easy option that was unlikely to challenge her intellectually.

As it is the first time that she has lived away from home she intends to experience student life to the full. She attends the minimum number of taught sessions, and is quite strategic by generally attending only those sessions directly related to the assessments.

### Contextual information: institution

Sonya's constant questions and requests for clarification frustrate lecturers. They wish that she could understand that this is not what art and design education is about. She needs to adopt a more developmental approach instead of simply looking for answers.

The part-time member of staff only comes in once every two weeks and has so many emails to look at that she didn't read the assessment briefing information in full. However, she did not want to appear foolish in front of students so guessed the answer to Sonya's question.

### Learning points to consider:

- How do you integrate part-time members of staff?
- How can you open up dialogues about assessing creativity?
- How could formative assessment help the student?

### Key points emerging:

## Case Study 6 – The place of the placement

Lewis, an undergraduate student, is on a ten-week work placement which is proving to be very difficult. The department he has been placed in has severe staff shortages, which is causing stress in the workplace. Lewis is not getting enough support during his placement and this is compounding his anxieties about whether or not he will pass his assessment. In addition, he was recently harassed at work.

Lewis has to submit three written assignments during this placement. He finds this bewildering and wonders why some of this work could not have been cleared before the placement. He simply cannot understand why this work was not given in his previous eight-week university study block when he had plenty of spare time. He is now confronted by what seems like complete overload with placement tasks and assessments being expected contemporaneously.

Lewis decides that his only strategy for coping is to call in sick and miss some placement days to work on his written assignments. Although he makes some progress with these, when he returns to the placement his mentor asks to see him and questions his commitment to the placement. He informs Lewis that he will fail the placement if he misses another day as his absences will then exceed the allowable limit.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

# Case Study 6 – The place of the placement

## Contextual information: student

Lewis, although only 20, lives with a partner and her two young children. His placement involves shift work and this is causing him grief at home where his partner is struggling to cope. He is beginning to have a real sense of injustice about his placement fuelled by the fact that some of his fellow students have placements with a nine-to-five work pattern in a well-supported environment. They are being given study time during the placement to complete their assignments whereas he gets nothing.

Lewis thinks that this conflict has arisen because the timing of these assessments was chosen to meet the needs of academic staff and not students. After talking to his placement mentor he realises that there is still much to do to achieve his workplace competencies. So, in effect, he realises that by taking time off, he has replaced one set of anxieties with another and, would you believe it, he feels like he is coming down with a bout of flu!

## Contextual information: institution

The programme tutors are well aware that the placement can be very challenging. However, the tutors believe that the placement is the perfect opportunity for students to relate their theoretical studies to practical experience.

Lewis's personal tutor recognises the difficulties that he faces and is very aware about how important it is – for financial and social reasons – that Lewis completes the programme on time. She also knows that the placement environment where Lewis is working is invariably challenging and lacking in support, but is often seen as the most rewarding by students. Her first idea is to provide Lewis with a revised schedule of assessments. However, although she can discuss this possibility, the ultimate decision rests with the programme tutor. She is acutely aware that current regulations firmly state that all students in a cohort should submit at the same time.

## Learning points to consider:

- How can tutors manage the student experience across diverse placements?
- Should time-management skills be considered within the curriculum?
- Consider the limits placed upon the personal tutor role.

## Key points emerging:

## Case Study 7 – Equity of treatment

Shaun is a final year student about to complete his dissertation. The programme team have noticed that Shaun's attitude appears to have changed recently, as he seems to be avoiding appointments with tutors. It was assumed that this was due to dissertation stress, common amongst final year students.

Although his dissertation tutor was concerned she felt there was no real cause for alarm. Unfortunately, Shaun ended up handing the dissertation in a week late.

The university has a strict policy relating to failure to submit on time, so the dissertation has only been awarded a 40% pass mark even though it would have achieved a higher mark if it had been handed in by the deadline.

The dissertation tutor was disappointed that she could only award a pass because the dissertation was strong, but she did worry that parts of the dissertation read differently to Shaun's previous work. She tried typing a bit of the dissertation into the 'Google' search engine but nothing of any consequence came up. Although she has no proof of plagiarism she mentions this to the programme leader.

In other subjects Shaun's grades are also suffering. This, combined with the late submission of the dissertation, and the suspicion of plagiarism, is now causing real concern for the programme leader who requests to meet with Shaun urgently.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

# Case Study 7 – Equity of treatment

## Contextual information: student

Shaun is having a bad year in general. One minute he is a bundle of energy and feels on top of the world, the next he feels overly anxious and lonely. He has been to see the doctor because he has been having trouble sleeping. The doctor has prescribed sleeping tablets and antidepressants and has referred him to the hospital for psychological assessment. Although the medication really helps, it has made him feel 'a bit weird'.

He is really anxious about the hospital referral and decided to go and discuss this with a student counsellor. He didn't think to submit an extenuating circumstances form as he visited the doctor after handing in his dissertation.

## Contextual information: institution

The student support advisor Shaun saw suggested that she write to the programme team to inform them of his difficulties but Shaun was adamant that they should not be informed. In spite of reassurance, he worried that this information might adversely affect the staff attitude toward him. Under confidentiality rules she had to follow his wishes in this respect, even though she knew that an extenuating circumstances form could be submitted in retrospect.

The dissertation tutor still feels that elements of Shaun's work may have tended towards plagiarism but she is slightly reticent to consult the plagiarism software project, located in learning resources, about a dissertation that had just been given a minimum pass mark anyway.

## Learning points to consider:

- If tutors suspect plagiarism, what support is available to them to help them pursue this matter?
- Is it fair to apply lateness rules to a student with mental health problems?
- How does the Special Education Needs and Disabilities Act (SENDA) apply to this scenario?

## Key points emerging:

## Case Study 8 – Distance learning

Sarah is a highly motivated, part-time Masters student, studying hard to achieve good grades. Ideally, she would have liked to study full-time, but as a single mother she has no choice but to retain her current full-time employment. As a result of these circumstances she is keen to use her study time effectively.

Sarah has just submitted a 3,000-word case study assessment. She has worked particularly hard towards this assignment as it provides the first allocated grade contributing toward the final degree classification.

Sarah is apprehensive about the assignment and has particular concerns regarding analysis and application. A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) supports all modules, so Sarah has posted a query to the board. But even after five days of frequent checking she had not received any replies. In addition, she has tried to telephone the module tutor at least three times, but was simply told, by the university switchboard, that there was no reply.

Six weeks later her work is returned to her. Although the grade awarded was acceptable, she is devastated by the comments received. They were pedantic, unconstructive and not related to the assessment material.

The few comments that were made included:

- 'the page numbers are not in the correct area'
- 'typing errors'
- 'weak analysis with little evidence of grounded application'.

The latter comment was extremely hurtful given the numerous attempts she had made to contact the tutor before submission. She has finally managed to arrange a meeting with the module tutor to discuss the feedback which he gave her.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

# Case Study 8 – Distance learning

## Contextual information: student

Sarah is a mature student with teenage children. It is nearly 25 years since she completed a chemistry degree. Following the birth of triplets 18 years ago, she became a full-time mother. She returned to a clerical position when they reached the age of 14. Her marriage broke down a couple of years ago, finances are tight and as a result, she is supplementing her income by working in a bar on Friday and Saturday evenings.

She is now determined to restart a science-based career by taking a Masters programme. Although no work experience was required as an entry qualification, her fellow students all seem to be in related careers and she feels this assumption has also been made about her circumstances. Given her busy work life, she saw the use of a VLE as a vital component and is frustrated to find that very little use is made of its facilities. She does not have the opportunity to keep dropping by the university in the off-chance that she might catch the tutor as the switchboard operators suggested.

## Contextual information: institution

Terry (57), the module tutor, has decided to retire at 60. Terry has lost the zest for the teaching, which, he believes, has become increasingly pressurised over the last few years. He feels that the increase in student numbers has doubled the marking load and that too much emphasis is being placed on technology as a support tool. In Terry's opinion, academic managers are simply using virtual learning environments (VLEs) as an excuse to cut costs by increasing staff: student ratios and reducing contact time.

Terry is an active researcher and hopes to apply for a professorship before retiring. This has resulted in long periods of absence for fieldwork and conference attendance. All the Masters assignments he marked last weekend were 'OK'. No-one had failed and he is surprised that a student has requested a meeting to discuss her result.

## Learning points to consider:

- What are the roles of VLEs in learning?
- Do we make assumptions about prior learning?
- How do we allocate staff to support new initiatives?

## Key points emerging:

## Case Study 9 – Rejection or reflection?

Manpreet is an overseas fee-paying postgraduate student. Within the curriculum it is standard practice for a student to give a presentation explaining their proposed Masters dissertation topic to fellow students and tutors, from whom feedback will be received. The first of these is to take place in November, around two months into the programme. Whilst Manpreet has good language skills, even though English is not his first language, he has had no experience of receiving peer feedback before. However, he is aware of the importance of feedback within the programme. The programme has a total of 15 students and he is the only overseas student within the group. He has high respect for tutors and feels uncomfortable with the casual relationship many students appear to have with them. He has formed a friendship with a mature student, Jim, who is equally apprehensive as he is one of the few to have entered the programme from a professional rather than academic background.

On the day of the presentations, Manpreet volunteered to give his presentation first. He was shocked throughout his presentation by the extent of the dialogue with tutor and peers and by the personal nature of the comments. He was overwhelmed by the level of feedback given and was also surprised by the questions that were asked. He thought that he was just presenting, but many of the questions addressed to him were about the reflective processes he undertook.

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

## Case Study 9 – Rejection or reflection?

### Contextual information: student

Manpreet feels demoralised and doesn't know whether he has 'passed' as there was no credit/grade given for the presentation. He talks with Jim about why this was such a negative experience and says that he doesn't want to continue on the programme. Jim is surprised by his reaction because this feedback process is not unusual and not a big deal. Jim assures Manpreet that to be challenged in the classroom is quite normal and that the tutor addressed the other students in the same manner.

### Contextual information: institution

The subject head of the department is concerned about the attrition rate of overseas students. It was highlighted in a recent statistical report that the department is losing money because international students often withdraw from courses in the very early stages of programmes.

Frank, the programme leader, notices that a small number of students in the group do not participate and that Manpreet is part of this group. The tutor finds this irritating as he feels that by the time students reach postgraduate level they should be able to express themselves in an appropriate manner.

He feels that all students should know about formative assessment and the feedback process and therefore will be prepared for questions in the sessions. He interprets the lack of engagement by the quieter students as their deliberately choosing not to participate in the robust give-and-take of classroom debate.

### Learning points to consider

- How do you induct students from a diverse population?
- What do students understand about the role of formative assessment?
- What are the cultural perceptions associated with British Higher Education?

### Key points emerging:

## Case Study 10 – Practicality or plagiarism?

Li is now approaching the end of her programme. She came to University three years ago from a college in the Pacific Rim. So far, throughout her joint degree programme, she has only been asked to prepare essays. In the first year, she used the study skills centre to get extra help with essay writing and through this has become very proficient at essay writing. The joint degree programme is actually delivered across two departments. This semester, in two of the modules – one from each of the two departments – students were given a list of essay topics from which they could make a free choice. Both the lists and marking criteria for the two modules were actually quite similar, so Li was able to produce two quite similar essays in which a large proportion of the content was unchanged.

When the two essays were returned, one achieved a bare minimum pass whereas the second achieved an 'A' grade and the highest mark on that particular module.

As she could not understand why the marks were so different she approached her personal tutor to discuss it and took both pieces of work with her. The tutor although generally supportive, could only say:

'I feel you were ill-advised to replicate much of your material in the two essays and I would suggest you do not pursue this matter any further.'

**What are the key issues for the student?**

**What are the key issues for the institution?**

# Case Study 10 – Practicality or plagiarism?

## Contextual information: student

Li has set herself very high standards in her studies. She has striven to perform well in order to secure a highly-paid job so she can support her remaining family in China. Her marks so far have been in line with those required for a 'first class' degree classification. She has found this new set of marks a very demotivating experience and is concerned that the low mark may put her predicted first-degree classification in jeopardy. She did not really understand what the tutor meant by 'ill-advised'. She decided, therefore, to go against the personal tutor's advice and approach the programme leader to discuss the mark differential further.

## Contextual information: institution

The personal tutor was very concerned that it was so easy for this student to submit two virtually identical pieces of work and it not be picked up. But in his view he recognised that:

1. This could potentially be viewed as academic misconduct.
2. He realised that the difference in marks was likely to be due to the differing tacit expectations of lecturers across two discipline areas.
3. This highlighted issues associated with modularity and free choice.

However, he decided to keep quiet rather than unearth a complex situation.

## Learning points to consider:

- What is the role of general and specific assessment criteria across subjects?
- How does moderation of assessment tasks operate within a programme and across departments?
- When do you use the 'p' word (plagiarism)?

## Key points emerging:

# Illustrative Workshop Activities

The following examples illustrate different ways in which this publication can be used. The methods you select may depend on the time available, the experience of the staff involved, the type of event you are planning – such as an ‘away day’ – or as part of your programme to support new staff.

We would especially encourage you to consider how you might include students in this process. We found that the involvement of students helped all parties to appreciate the complex nature of assessment and that by understanding different perspectives the whole issue of assessment can be moved forward in a positive way.

## Example 1

This method may be appropriate if time is limited or you wish to work with individuals or small groups. In this example the first page of the case study is read. The blank boxes headed ‘student issues’ and ‘institutional issues’ are then completed and discussed. Following this discussion the next page gives further contextual issues which can develop the discussion even further. At the end of the session it is useful to pose the question, ‘what might individuals, course teams or the university do differently as a result of the workshop?’

## Example 2

This example may be appropriate if more time is available. If time is at a premium then fewer case studies could be discussed.

### Aim

To review the process of the assessment by examining a number of stakeholder agendas.

### Participants

Maximum of twenty participants in groups of three or four. This could be an all-student group, all-staff group, or a mixed staff/student group.

### Suggested Timeframe

Minimum of 45 minutes, 1-2 hours recommended.

### Workshop Preparation

Before the session, it is recommended that the workshop facilitator selects up to five case studies. The facilitator can select any of the cases, but

please note that Case study 1 – ‘The diversity of assessment’ was strongly recommended by the MESA students as a scenario which many students would identify with.

Hint: If time is tight you may wish to reduce choice to two or three cases, which could be used by multiple groups contemporaneously.

## Outline

It is expected that each group (of three or four) will concentrate initially on just one of the cases selected. However, it is recommended that a handout is prepared for all the participants containing all the case studies to be used during the workshop.

As you can see, each case study comes in three parts:

- a) the scenario
- b) contextual information about the student
- c) contextual information about the ‘institution’ role (i.e. module tutor, guidance tutor, programme, etc. as appropriate).

It is anticipated that in each group, one member will take on the role of a student, one the tutor, the third an observer. In groups of four, the fourth member can take an optional role as an academic manager.

For each case, it is recommended that parts (a), (b) and (c) are separated from each other and distributed as follows.

- Part (a) is distributed to all group members

- Part (b) is only made available to the person assuming the student role
- Part (c) is only made available to the person(s) in the tutor and/or academic manager role.
- The observer is provided with all the material?

The following three pages illustrate the information which would be provided to the three different roles that individuals would represent in the exercise. In practice this could be done by providing the first page of the selected case study to all three roles, with the contextual information for each of the roles being given separately (e.g. in envelopes). All examples are taken from Case Study 1.

# Workshop material provided for each role for Example 2

## Student role (taken from Case Study 1 on page 11)

Stuart is currently on the first year of a modular degree programme and has to study ten modules over the year. Although he is only half way through the academic year, Stuart feels as if he has come across every assessment method in the world. For instance, for one of the year-long modules he is required to build a portfolio; in the statistics module he has to undergo regular computer-aided assessment; for one of the strategy modules he has to do a presentation on video, as well as create a poster based on some group work. In one of his optional modules, the module leader, drawing upon popular media culture, randomly allocated small groups to take part in a quiz – based on ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ – at the start of each seminar.

The method by which Stuart achieved his assessments also varied. For the poster group work, the students were allowed to select their own groups and Stuart opted to join with his slightly wayward friends. In contrast, for the quiz he was allocated to a group which included two Chinese students and a Cypriot. During this exercise, Stuart seemed to spend most of his time describing the concept of the show, ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ to the international students.

## Contextual information for student (see page 12)

Stuart is 18 and has dyslexia. Up until now he has led a quiet life as the son of a croft farmer on the Isle of Skye. He is a studious and intelligent lad, but rather naive for his age and tends to be easily led. He really struggles with the group work. When he is with his friends they end up doing anything but work, but when he was with the international students there just seemed to be either long periods of uncomfortable silence or he was repeatedly explaining the rules of ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’. Because of this, he can’t help but feel that he did all the work.

Stuart feels as if the degree programme is in the middle of some sort of academic experiment. He feels as if any skills learnt in the assessment methods aren’t transferable across to other activities. He never thought he would say this, given his dyslexia, but he is longing to do a 3,000-word essay.

## Tutor and/or academic manager role(s)

Stuart is currently on the first year of a modular degree programme and has to study ten modules over the year. Although he is only half way through the academic year, Stuart feels as if he has come across every assessment method in the world. For instance, for one of the year-long modules he is required to build a portfolio; in the statistics module he has to undergo regular computer aided assessment; for one of the strategy modules he has to do a presentation on video, as well as create a poster based on some group work. In one of his optional modules, the module leader, drawing upon popular media culture, randomly allocated small groups to take part in a quiz – based on ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ – at the start of each seminar.

The method by which Stuart achieved his assessments also varied. For the poster group work, the students were allowed to select their own groups and Stuart opted to join with his slightly wayward friends. In contrast, for the quiz he was allocated to a group which included two Chinese students and a Cypriot. During this exercise, Stuart seemed to spend most of his time describing the concept of the show, ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ to the international students.

## Contextual information for tutor/academic manager

Last academic year, the School was subject to an institutional audit. One of the criticisms arising related to the lack of variety in assessment across the programme. The reviewers felt that too much reliance was placed on the essay as an assessment method. This academic year the school is undergoing rationalisation of their modules. For each module, the School has asked module leaders to ensure contact hours are reduced to a maximum of two per week. Additionally, module leaders were asked, in light of the audit recommendation, to review their assessment methods for the current academic year. Although the School did arrange for staff development sessions on assessment innovation, module tutors worked autonomously in applying any changes to their module.

To follow up, the School’s Dean reviewed student module feedback and, ironically, the module which received the most positive feedback was the one that had not had any changes made to the assessment strategy.

## Observer role

Stuart is currently on the first year of a modular degree and there are ten modules altogether to undertake on the programme. Although he is only half way through the academic year, Stuart feels as if he has come across every assessment method in the world. For instance, for one of the year-long modules he is required to build a portfolio; in the statistics module he has to undergo regular computer-aided assessment; for one of the strategy modules he has to do a presentation on video as well as create a poster based on some group work. In one of his optional modules, the module leader, drawing upon popular media culture, randomly allocated small groups to take part in a 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?'-based quiz at the start of each seminar.

For the poster group-work, the students were allowed to select their own groups and Stuart opted to join with his slightly wayward friends. In contrast, in the '30 things' exercise he was allocated to a group, which included two Chinese students and a Cypriot. For this exercise Stuart seemed to spend most of his time describing the concept of the show, 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' to the international students.

## Prompt questions for the observer

Key issues for the student?

Key issues for the institution

Conflicts and overlaps?

# The Workshop Session

1. Ask participants to form groups of three (or four) as preferred.

**Hint:** Try to ensure groups are not 'buddy-centric'.

2. Explain to the groups that within the groups one is to act as a student, another the tutor, the third the observer and if appropriate, the fourth – optional – management role.

**Hint:** If working with a mixed group ask participants to take on an unfamiliar role. For example, a student takes on the tutor role and vice versa.

3. Hand out the basic scenario and allow around five minutes reading time.

4. Give out extra information to the relevant participants.

**Hint:** You may wish to also provide the observer with all additional contextual information.

5. Those in the student and tutor roles are now asked to engage in conversation about the scenario. The observer is asked to record any of the key concerns and to note any conflicts and/or overlaps in the issues raised.

**Hint:** It is recommended that 15–20 minutes is set aside for this to take place.

6. Each group is now asked to review the observer's comments and as a group, make notes of up to three key learning points (on flip chart paper) arising from the exercise.

**Hint:** If time is restricted this could be reduced to a single key learning point.

7. Each group is asked to briefly describe the scenario and the key learning points to the other groups.

**Hint:** Hand out to all participants the scenarios used by all groups.

Allow each group 10–15 minutes to present their report.

If time is restricted, the workshop facilitator, with the aid of a handout, very briefly describes each scenario for the benefit of all.

8. Plenary: Based on discussions made, the workshop participants decide on three action points, which can be taken forward as (future/current) good practice.

## Activity Example 3

**‘Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students.’**

George Brown, LTSN Assessment Series 3: *A guide for lecturers*

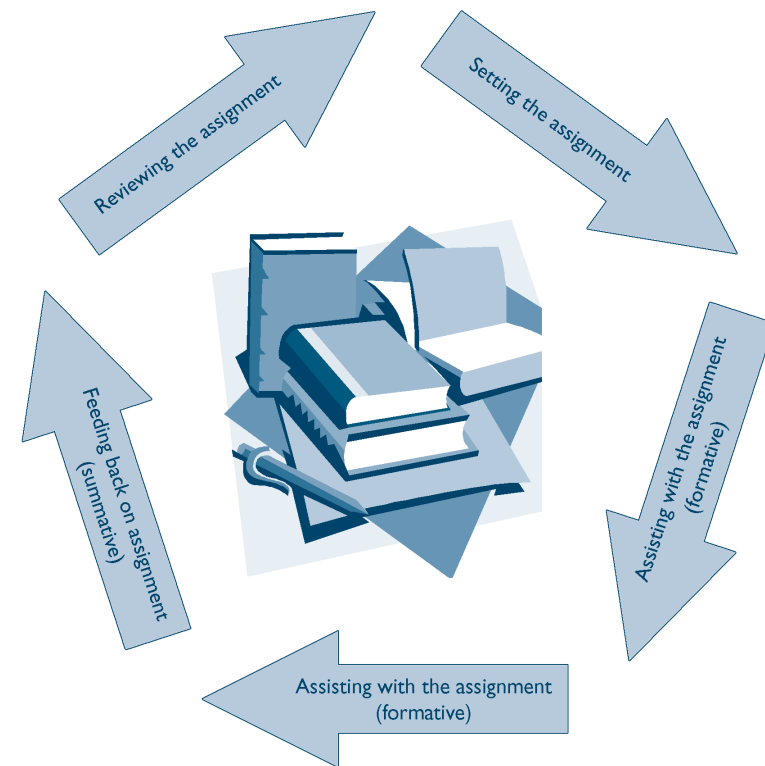
Many of the case studies presented are fictional and at first glance appear to be a little unrealistic and/or stereotypical. However, the seed for most scenarios was grounded in the reality of MESA students’ experience. In fact, a number of MESA students suggested that the boundaries were pushed even further. They believed that by injecting both humour and elements of the improbable, students and staff could use any of the cases as a catalyst for discussion around the various stages of assessment.

Figure 1 illustrates a model showing a five-point cycle for assessment. The grid overleaf (Figure 2) illustrates this in a linear form. In addition, for each stage a number of pointers for deliberation are made.

As an exercise, it is suggested that one case is selected and participants are asked to make note on the grid – from their own perspective – on how they would handle the five stages within the cycle.

This exercise could be conducted:

- by an individual tutor: to initiate thinking on their own assignment processes.
- by student/tutor pairing: to gain insights from both viewpoints.
- as a small group activity: to stimulate general discussion.



**Figure 1: The Five-point Assessment Cycle**

Aim: To conduct discussion around the cycle of assessment

# Activity Example 3 – Figure 2: Assessment Cycle grid

<b>Setting the assignment</b>	<p>Deliberations?</p> <p>Is there constructive alignment between teaching, learning and assessment?</p> <p>Does the assignment allow students to demonstrate appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding?</p>	<b>Own observations:</b>
<b>Launching the assignment</b>	<p>Deliberations?</p> <p>Are there opportunities for verbal briefings and Question and Answers sessions?</p> <p>Are students offered samples of high, medium and low standards of work?</p>	<b>Own observations:</b>
<b>Assisting the assignment</b>	<p>Deliberations?</p> <p>Are there formative feedback opportunities?</p> <p>Does the teaching and learning prepare students for the mode of assessment (e.g. presentation development if assessment is via a presentation)? Does it provide opportunities for practice and to learn from any mistakes?</p>	<b>Own observations:</b>

**Feedback on the assignment**

Deliberations?

Is there a tight marking turn-around time so that students can learn from this assignment?

Are there any opportunities for students to discuss their marks and feedback comments with lecturers?

Does the written feedback and numerical grade match on each assignment?

Can the students understand the feedback comments?

Can the students apply the learning from the feedback to other areas of their work?

**Own observations:**

**Reviewing the assignment**

Deliberations?

Were there sections of the assignment brief that caused confusion? Should the brief be redrafted for next year?

Was there any external examiner feedback on this assignment?

**Own observations:**

**Key points emerging:**

# Contributor reflections

Here are some of the reflections and learning points from the students and staff who were involved in the MESA project.

## Students

- I really enjoyed having the opportunity to see my education from the perspective of lecturers and managers and the experiences of others.
- Assessment is key to learning development, so the processes and potential must be clear to both students and tutors.
- It has been heart-warming to learn that you are not alone, that other university students from around the country and on different courses experience similar problems and that 'the grass isn't always greener on the other side'.
- Learning how the whole assessment system works, how I fit into it and can improve the communication between the two has been useful.
- I have found another side to assessment, which goes beyond the actual work I have produced and wouldn't have previously thought about.
- The tutor's point-of-view about assessments – students aren't the only ones who get stressed at assessment.
- The importance of seeing the tutors/lecturers perspective. As a student, you do not always consider this.
- Becoming involved with this project made my degree 'real' rather than just stuff I do.
- I have gained a positive feeling achieved from being involved in making changes and improving future student experiences.

## Staff

- Seeing the value of the potential role of student reps and the Student Union in improving assessment practice and 'assessment for learning' has been very helpful.
- How tutor/lecturer, manager and student can work effectively together to improve the student experience and make positive changes.
- We underestimate the real benefits of constructive staff/student dialogue. This group has demonstrated that and I now need to take that forward in my own institution.
- This experience has made me realise that learning and assessment go hand-in-hand and that it can be an interactive process if done correctly. I never questioned the assessment process and certainly never thought about trying to change it. I can now go away and look at assessment holistically and any other processes that can help me develop and grow and try to improve on that process.
- By fully considering the impact of assessment on students and their lives, it should be possible to make a real difference, whilst maintaining standards.
- The assessment experience is different for everyone and it acts as a very powerful motivational tool that can enhance or damage students' self-esteem.
- Effective assessment can promote deep approaches to learning.



