A view of the Assessment and Feedback Landscape: baseline analysis of policy and practice from the JISC Assessment & Feedback programme

A report for JISC by Dr Gill Ferrell, April 2012
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Executive Summary

Assessment and feedback lies at the heart of the learning experience, and forms a significant part of both academic and administrative workload. It remains however the single biggest source of student dissatisfaction with the higher education experience. The JISC Assessment and Feedback programme (Sept 2011-Aug 2014) is supporting large-scale changes in assessment and feedback practice, supported by technology, with the aim of enhancing the learning and teaching process and delivering efficiencies and quality improvements. This report summarises baseline reviews undertaken by a number of institutions as part of their programme activity.

The report paints a picture of a sector that has identified some significant issues and the need for change. There is a growing body of literature and empirical evidence on what constitutes effective support for learning and some excellent examples of the innovative use of technology to deliver that support but, on the whole, the sector is finding that ‘practice remains stubbornly resistant to change.’

The main findings of this report are:

- the real responsibility for assessment and feedback is highly devolved within institutions and considerable variations in practice give many institutions cause for concern;
- formal documentation remains quite technical and procedural in nature and is slow to catch up with the shift in thinking about assessment as a more developmental process for as well as of learning;
- the academic structure of degrees, particularly 12 week modules and semesterisation, contributes to assessment of learning and diminishes opportunities for assessment for learning;
- academic staff have too few opportunities to gain awareness of different approaches to/ forms of assessment because of insufficient time and a lack of opportunities to share new practices;
- there continues to be heavy reliance on traditional types of assessment such as essays and examinations in some disciplines;
- considerable efforts are being made to develop practice that feeds forwards into the learner’s longitudinal development but academic opinion on approaches to feedback remains divided;
- lack of sequencing different varieties of assessment, timing of feedback in relation to the next task, and a culture of ‘ticking off’ modules all prevent feedback from feeding forward;
- engagement with employers is causing some institutions to question some of their current practice which does not reflect the ways in which professionals undertake formative development during their careers;
- opportunities for students to engage with assessment design and the process of making academic judgements appears to be limited at present;
- many institutions have made significant investment in the technical infrastructure to support assessment and feedback but this is not yet delivering resource efficiencies due to localised variations in underlying processes;
- institutions are preferring to work with existing/established technologies but are nonetheless finding that innovation projects are difficult to scale up;
- institutions need to develop effective structures to facilitate the sharing of good practice that exists in small pockets across each institution.
**Introduction**

Assessment and feedback lies at the heart of the learning experience, and forms a significant part of both academic and administrative workload. It remains however the single biggest source of student dissatisfaction with the higher education experience. Most providers of higher education are seeking to enhance their approaches to assessment and feedback to better meet learner needs and expectations and are having to do so in the face of increasing resource constraints. The JISC Assessment and Feedback programme (Sept 2011-Aug 2014) is supporting large-scale changes in assessment and feedback practice, supported by technology, with the aim of enhancing the learning and teaching process and delivering efficiencies and quality improvements.

The programme consists of 20 projects organised under various strands of activity. The eight largest scale projects were required to undertake a review of current processes and practice as a baseline to aid in the planning and evaluation of subsequent innovations. These reviews also included an analysis of the outcomes and lessons of previous projects and initiatives, and the experiences of other institutions who have implemented similar types of innovations or technologies.

The baseline reviews form a valuable evidence base and give a picture of current assessment and feedback practice in 10 institutions. The depth of the analyses and the breadth of comparison with other institutions gives confidence that the overall findings are typical of the UK HE sector as a whole. The individual baseline reports remain the property of the institutions concerned and will not be published in their entirety as they contain sensitive data at a fine level of granularity. This report summarises the main findings of relevance to the sector as a whole. It is drawn largely from the data in the baseline reports and, to a lesser extent, other JISC project outputs and information publicly available on institutional and project websites.

The report assumes a certain amount of familiarity with the main processes and technologies relating to assessment and feedback and does not therefore cover a lot of background/definitions. References are included only where they are used in quotes by the project teams. The reader is referred to the JISC Design Studio for a more comprehensive literature review and overview of related projects.

The institutions whose baseline reviews have contributed directly to this report are:

- Bath Spa University (partnered by the University of Winchester)
- Cornwall College (partnered by Hull College)
- University of Dundee
- University of Exeter
- Hertfordshire University
- Institute of Education
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Queen’s University Belfast
Review approaches and sources of evidence

The reviews were wide-ranging, looking to assess the effectiveness of current practice and to include measures of efficiency e.g. in relation to staff workload. They took in a rich variety of sources of qualitative and quantitative evidence from a range of stakeholders including:

- senior managers
- academic staff
- learning and teaching support staff
- administrative staff
- students
- employers

The sources of evidence included:

- structured and semi-structured interviews (some of which were video recorded)
- workshops and focus groups
- process maps
- rich pictures
- institutional (and devolved) strategy and policy documents
- institutional QA documentation
- reports by QAA, OFSTED and external examiners
- course evaluations
- degree programme reviews
- student surveys
- quantitative analysis of key data sets using keywords & pattern matching
- data from research projects
- questionnaires of various types:
  - amended versions of the assessment experience questionnaire (AEQ) \cite{Gibbs and Simpson 2003}
  - the FAST project written feedback self-evaluation questionnaire
  - The Assessment for Teaching and Learning Audit Benchmarks (ATLAB) project questionnaire \cite{Whitelock and Cross 2011}
- mapping against \texttt{ESCAPE project assessment timelines}

Assessment and feedback strategy and policy

Despite the central part played by assessment and feedback in the learning and teaching process, there is little evidence of institutions being strongly directive in terms of their strategy and policy steer in these areas. Assessment is more likely than feedback to be mentioned in top level institutional strategies and there is a shift for Learning and Teaching strategies to be renamed Learning, Teaching and Assessment but this is by no means universal. Institutions appear more likely to have assessment ‘frameworks’ and ‘policies’ than top-level strategies and these are often mainly aimed at guiding the development of strategy and policy at a more devolved (school/faculty/college) level. In many cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to find information relating to institutional assessment and feedback strategy and policy in public areas of the website. One of the projects in the programme has the explicit aim of developing an institutional assessment and feedback strategy as part of the project.

There is however one excellent example of a suite of (readily accessible) institutional strategies which matches very well with the JISC infoNet guidance on creating a \texttt{strategic framework} ‘articulating and co-ordinating a network of integrated strategic and operational planning documents all of which are informed by, and consistent with, the overall strategic plan and which contribute at some level to realising its objectives.’ An institutional Assessment and Feedback strategy is cross referenced to the Technology Enhanced Learning strategy as well as to the section on the development of learning spaces in the institutional Strategic Plan (ensuring that learning spaces are designed with innovative assessment activities in mind). The Assessment and Feedback strategy provides the model for a series of college level strategies which will be linked to employability targets.
There are other examples across the sector where institutional strategy puts assessment at the heart of learning but joined-up approaches are by no means commonplace.

A major concern for senior managers appears to be inconsistency in assessment and feedback practice across institutions and the risk that this may leave the institution open to student complaints. This is not unexpected when the locus of control appears so highly devolved and it may explain why many institutional strategy and policy documents appear to have a procedural rather than a developmental (in learning terms) feel about them. In considering where the boundaries of institutional/local policy-making lie, one institution noted that ‘… ‘assessment’ refers only to summative assessment (assessment which counts in decisions about progression or final awards). Formative assessment is considered as a part of learning and teaching and is not subject to any formal procedures.’

It should however be noted that many of these relatively ‘loose’ steers are accompanied by a variety of high quality guidance materials as was certainly the case with the institution quoted above.

One institution undertook an analysis of various iterations of its learning and teaching strategy and noted the shift from ‘a technical, procedural orientation to assessment’ to greater orientation towards the learner experience. There was also a shift from thinking that the institution needed to look beyond its own boundaries for inspiration to recognition that much good practice existed within the institution and the real issue was the lack of structures to enable sharing of these examples. This institution also undertook an exhaustive review of its quality documentation and a range of other discussion and guidance documents. It concluded that ‘The broadest and most formative orientations towards assessment can be seen in the later documents, which are not yet part of formal institutional policy. In these, the formative and developmental aspects of assessment are prominent, and attention is given to assessment’s role in learning and the development of students’ identities.’ It is likely to be the case in most institutions that formal documentation takes a significant amount of time to catch up with current thinking. It is notable that a keyword search on ‘feedback’ across much of the institutional documentation was more likely to return results relating to feedback on courses/teaching rather than feedback to students. Another institution commenting on the vocabulary used in its documentation noted ‘We were surprised that the word summative had so few matches, but on reflection it may well be that there is an inherent understanding that an assessment is summative unless otherwise noted.’

It is significant that these shifts in thinking also take a long time to filter through to student facing documents ‘This [the shift described in the previous paragraph] is not reflected in the documentation for students, however, which remains focused on procedural and technical concerns, specifying rights and responsibilities.’ Only half of the institutions identified important student-facing policy documents that outlined their approach to assessment at the institutional level (Student Charters/Handbook). Another stated that although it had developed a set of ‘Threshold Standards for the Student Learning Experience’ these standards did not currently cover assessment (a revision to this effect is however in progress).
Educational principles

Although it might be assumed that an underlying set of educational principles would form the basis of institutional strategy and policy, it appears that this is not necessarily the case hence the ordering of the sections in this report. In many cases the articulation of educational principles appears in second tier documentation i.e. in advice and guidance documents rather than actual strategy and policy. There is widespread referencing of the REAP principles as well as the NUS feedback principles (and the QAA Code of Practice [now the UK Quality Code for Higher Education]) without necessarily stating a firm institutional commitment to the application of the principles.

Whilst the projects in the Assessment and Feedback Programme are able to articulate principles that influence their work, these are not necessarily the same as the principles in the formal documentation for their institution. Institutional principles again show considerable concern with issues of procedure and consistency e.g.:

- The principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment should be explicit, valid and reliable.
- That all University processes and procedures for assessment and feedback should be explicit, valid and reliable and all students receive parity of treatment.
- To publicise and use clear assessment criteria and, where appropriate, marking schemes, to ensure that marking is carried out fairly and consistently across all subjects.
- The procedures for marking and for moderating marks must be transparent and fair.
- To ensure that the standard for each award and award element is set and maintained at the appropriate level, and that student performance is properly judged against this.
- Achievable: assessments and assessment regimes should be designed so that the threshold requirements are achievable by any student admitted on to the programme of study
- Gradable: it should usually be possible to grade student performance for a specified assessment using a full range of marks.
- Students should be fully aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and the consequences associated with it.
- Everyone involved in assessment of students must be competent to undertake their roles and responsibilities.
- Assessment should be conducted with rigour, probity and fairness with due regard to security.
- To ensure that assessment is conducted with attention, integrity and with due regard for security.

It can be seen that the examples above are tonally and qualitatively different from the principles most often cited as reflecting current thinking and influencing the projects in the programme:

REAP (RE-Engineering Assessment Practices) Principles

Assessment tasks should:

(engage)
1. Capture sufficient study time and effort in and out of class
2. Distribute students’ effort evenly across topics and weeks.
3. Engage students in deep not just shallow learning activity
4. Communicate clear and high expectations to students.

Good feedback practice should:

(empower)
1. Clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards)
2. Facilitate the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning
3. Deliver high quality feedback to students: that enables them to self-correct
4. Encourage dialogue around learning (peer and tutor-student)
5. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
6. Provide opportunities to act on feedback
7. Provide information that teachers can use to help shape their teaching
NUS (National Union of Students) Ten Feedback Principles:

1. Should be for learning, not just of learning
   Feedback should be primarily used as a learning tool and therefore positioned for learning rather than as a measure of learning.

2. Should be a continuous process
   Rather than a one-off event after assessment, feedback should be part of continuous guided learning and an integral part of the learning experience.

3. Should be timely
   Feedback should be provided in a timely manner, allowing students to apply it to future learning and assessments. This timeframe needs to be communicated to students.

4. Should relate to clear criteria
   Objectives for assessment and grade criteria need to be clearly communicated to, and fully understood by, students. Subsequent feedback should be provided primarily in relation to this.

5. Should be constructive
   If feedback is to be constructive it needs to be concise, focused and meaningful to feed-forward, highlighting what is going well and what can be improved.

6. Should be legible and clear
   Feedback should be written in plain language so it can be easily understood by all students, enabling them to engage with it and support future learning.

7. Should be provided on exams
   Exams make up a high proportion of assessment and students should receive feedback on how well they did and how they could improve for the next time.

8. Should include self-assessment and peer-to-peer feedback
   Feedback from peers and self-assessment practices can play a powerful role in learning by encouraging reassessment of personal beliefs and interpretations.

9. Should be accessible to all students
   Not all students are full-time, campus based and so universities should utilise different technologies to ensure all students have easy access to their feedback.

10. Should be flexible and suited to students’ needs
    Students learn in different ways and therefore feedback is not ‘one size fits all’. Within reason students should be able to request feedback in various formats depending on their needs.

Gibbs and Simpson’s (2004) Conditions under which assessment supports student learning

1. Sufficient assessed tasks are provided for students to capture sufficient study time.
2. These tasks are engaged with by students, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course.
3. Tackling the assessed task engages students in productive learning activity of an appropriate kind.
4. Sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail.
5. The feedback focuses on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under the students’ control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics.
6. The feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance.
7. Feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success.
8. Feedback is appropriate, in relation to students’ understanding of what they are supposed to be doing.
9. Feedback is received and attended to.
10. Feedback is acted upon by the student.

A challenge for the projects in the programme, and indeed for any institution reviewing its practice, will be to effectively baseline the extent to which educational principles are genuinely reflected in practice and, where there is a mismatch, to ensure that agreement on educational principles forms the basis for engaging stakeholders in moving forward.
Approaches to assessment

As may be clear from the discussion above, although institutions are endeavouring to expand the range of assessment and feedback practice and seek opportunities to innovate, the bulk of current practice remains firmly rooted in traditional approaches and concentrates on assessment of, rather than for, learning. One institution identified six forms of assessment as being of interest to its review:

- summative
- formative
- criterion referenced
- diagnostic
- synoptic
- authentic

N.B. a further project is also looking at ipsative assessment

Awareness, and understanding, of the full range of forms was however very limited in the sample of staff interviewed. It was noted that, ‘Although formative assessment is now more widely recognised than it has been in the past, even that is still at an early stage of adoption.’ This resonates with experience elsewhere e.g. where only summative assessment is incorporated into formal institutional procedure. Of the six forms discussed with staff it appeared that the term ‘authentic’ resonated with many staff in initial interviews ‘Even if interviewees were not familiar with the term, they felt it was something that they could easily see the benefit of and that the term was not too specialist or technical.’

Further work suggested however that this feeling of synergy with the term may be confined to more vocationally-oriented disciplines. Another institution which used a questionnaire including the question ‘Staff are encouraged to locate assessment activities and tasks within an authentic context’ identified less awareness of the meaning/value of this form of assessment including one response: ‘Didn’t really understand what was meant by ‘an authentic context’ in the question above.’ A project team who felt the term authentic assessment fitted very well with their goal of changing assessment practice to enhance employability by describing an assessment in which ‘students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills’ is now reconsidering its use of the term having been challenged by those concerned to point out that very different forms of assessment can be authentic in the context in which they are applied.

One project in the programme notes two of the challenges it is specifically setting out to address as being:

- ‘Peer review and feedback are patchily implemented and viewed as ancillary or ‘second best’.
- ‘Self-assessment is often optional and rarely used.’

It is clear that the benefits of peer-to-peer learning are not well understood and that the process of encouraging interaction and group reflection is viewed as problematic in many areas: ‘… collaborative assessment has to be carefully used as regulations treat collusion in much the same way as plagiarism.’ In some cases policies designed to ensure parity and equity are actively mitigating against such reflection and dialogue. An example was cited where a school policy states ‘Staff will only answer questions about the assignments if all students are present. This is to avoid unfair advantage.’ Interpretation of the policy appears to have translated into a general acceptance that any kind of facilitated peer discussion of assignment tasks is prohibited (unless all students undertaking the assignment are present).

Where assessment practice incorporates a range of approaches to formative development, including peer-review, there is good evidence that this is delivering benefits as this quote from a QAA report on one of the participating institutions illustrates:

‘A range of formative and summative assessment methods is used to provide constructive feedback to students that promotes learning. Examples include feedback by employers on presentations, feedback provided by peer trainee teachers on teaching observations and feedback provided by fellow students through group assignments. Furthermore, a number of programmes have devised
assessments which involve students using formative feedback gained previously and applying the lessons learned in the following assignment.’

Overall the baselines show limited use of peer review but generally positive responses and outcomes where it is used. This is not however universal and some institutions note that students as well as staff need to be convinced of its value ‘I would rather just get the tutor feedback.’ (Part Time masters level student.

Types of assessment

In terms of types of assessment there continues to be heavy reliance on traditional forms such as essays and examinations. ‘Essays are a preferred method of assessing learning and this is consistent with student accounts of the predominance of essays.’ One large institution, which has a significant focus on employability, has noted a shift away from essays to forms such as portfolios: ‘… if we compare assignment types for 2010/11 with 2011/12, the percentage of exams and tests at level 4 has gone up slightly (22% rather than 19% of the total number of assignments), whilst 10% of assignments are now identified as essays compared to 24% in 2010/11 and the number of portfolio assessments has increased from 3% to 16%.’ Proportionately, most institutions may rely heavily on essays and exams, but one project’s baseline showed that degree programmes in the two partner institutions had an average of 11 different types of assessment tasks. In this case, students are exposed to more varieties of assessment but these may be one-offs, leading to confusion about goals and standards.

The majority of institutions however reported a much slower rate of change. ‘Nearly all students described the assessment as ‘essays’ so it seems that this is the dominant form of assessment although they may be using the term as a general term for a written assignment which might include e.g. learning journals and portfolios.’

Again it appears that institutional drivers towards strategic change are slow to translate into changes in practice with in individual subject disciplines as this example from a school level policy document illustrates: ‘The School [name] encourages the use of a wide variety of assessment methods. The most appropriate form of assessment for many, if not most, undergraduate modules in the School will be a piece of writing of short to medium length whether an essay or under examination conditions.’

The second sentence appears to firmly counter the first!

The selection of assessment types is an area where institutions appear to be receiving pressure from students to introduce more variety/authenticity as these comments from students illustrate:

- ‘Should have more assessment methods e.g. on-line EMI questions and recognise more practical experience. 100% Writing essays is not a very good variation in assessment methods!’
- ‘The course is very essay based and this makes it feel really onerous. It also does not suit my style of learning. I would prefer some organised sessions, workshops etc and for the written format to be more short answer question or other.’
- ‘There is too much emphasis on essays which becomes very boring and repetitive. I have seen others e.g. Cardiff using online material and interactions and therefore improving the course’s accessibility.’
- ‘I found essay writing difficult to get excited about. I moved to another course which I found more engaging, much more relevant to my situation.’

In one example students on course assessed by essay only were polled on whether they would like a greater variety of assignment types and, of 708 respondents, 75% were in favour of offering alternative assignment options. this may be a relatively small scale example but it backs up findings across the reviews: ‘Students were in agreement that a varied approach in the type of assessments, and having assessments spread across the module, was far more beneficial to them and their learning than simply having an exam or essay at the end, something which our literature review has correlated.’

The evidence suggests a move towards more varied, authentic and developmental forms of assessment is occurring but that the overall rate of change is slow. ‘While many [institution name] staff are also changing their practice or are aware of a need for change, there is a tailback of staff
who have not yet moved on from historical practices such as use of essays and use of feedback to explain and justify grades.’ One institution identified that overall there were 93 different types of assignment in use across the institution but that new ideas and good practice were slow to spread between disciplines.

Many of the projects are realising that in order to address some of the issues they have identified they need to look at the whole area of curriculum design ‘… we recognise that for a longitudinal and developmental approach to assessment to succeed, the over-reliance on essays or long written assignments may need to change because these assignments may not help learners develop M level academic thinking and writing approaches over time.’ Others are taking a more pragmatic view that, rather than look at curriculum redesign, they need to provide support in order to ensure more effective and efficient practice in relation to the more frequently used types of assessment e.g. ‘What are the most effective ways of giving feedback on essays? What kind of feedback can be provided on tests and exams? How long should feedback on presentations take to deliver? How can teams verify that their practice is inclusive?’

Feeding back/Feeding forward

If the picture relating to assessment practice is complex and variable then that around feedback is even more so. Whilst there is a considerable body of research evidence and literature around what constitutes good and effective practice, opinion within institutions remains diverse and divided: ‘… there is one programme leader who thinks that you shouldn’t have any feedback at all.’ It is significant that the NUS has campaigned specifically around the issue of feedback rather than assessment and feedback more generally (e.g. its 2008/9 Feedback Amnesty campaign).

Feedback is even more likely than assessment to be regulated at a devolved level. ‘Feedback to students on their submitted work is carried out by unit teams according to their own arrangements. There are no specific institutional requirements, except that feedback is expected to comply with the principles in the University Assessment Framework, nor is there any specific institutional oversight of the approach or the process itself.’ This example from a school level assessment and feedback policy illustrates a point made in a number of the reports that the use of feedback simply to justify a mark is still commonplace: ‘There is a standard feedback sheet. The feedback given addresses the marking criteria and explains the mark given in 100 – 250 words.’ In the example cited policy may however be out of line with current practice as in a survey conducted in the same institution 100% of staff surveyed (including those from this particular school) felt it was important or very/extremely important that ‘There are mechanisms for students to be provided with feedback beyond the marks assigned for assessed work.’

The diversity of policy approaches is not to say that many institutions do not give guidance on what constitutes good feedback. In relation to this piece of ‘guidance’, ‘Feedback is described as helping learners evaluate their ability, appreciate their current progress and plan development, and encourage self-reflection; it is asserted that it should be provided consistently, support positive elements of work, is a student entitlement and can be the basis for dialogue.’ the project team notes that ‘… it has a policy function, whether or not it is formally classed as an institutional policy.’

Many of the projects in the programme have feedback as a major focus and are very clear about what they are aiming to achieve e.g. ‘Effective dialogue should be adaptive (contingent on student needs); discursive (rich in two-way exchange); interactive (linked to actions related to a task goal); and reflective (encourage students and tutors to reflect on goal-action-feedback cycle).’

The baseline reviews have identified a number of issues relating to feedback that need to be addressed.
Consistency

It is unsurprising, given the vast spectrum of disciplines and practitioners involved and the diversity of views about what constitutes good educational practice, that there is a distinct lack of consistency in approach and implementation. This applies not just at institutional level as many students, staff and external examiners report similar variability across courses and indeed within individual modules.

‘From my experience as module convenor, which meant that I saw a wide range of feedback comments from various colleagues, I think that we, as a School, need to work very hard to ensure that all colleagues on all modules provide consistently constructive feedback to students. Too often, colleagues engage in relative marking (‘This piece is much better than others I have seen.’) or outright disheartening comments (‘There is very little of merit here, and I wonder where there student has been during the module.’) Overall, I get the sense that many of my colleagues see feedback as a burden rather than an opportunity, which is troubling me, as someone who has been trained at other HEIs to see feedback as an integral part of curriculum delivery.’

‘From looking at the feedback returned to the students it would seem to be somewhat variable in amount and quality.’ (External Examiner report)

‘Written feedback varied from comprehensive and lengthy, to unhelpful and brief.’ (Student comment from Course Evaluation Survey)

Many staff are cynical about student use of feedback and some admit to targeting their efforts at those students they believe most likely to benefit from the feedback. ‘Students with greatest difficulties tend either not to have done the necessary work (so feedback can be quite brief as it will simply be about the necessity to prepare better) or have serious problems with writing (in which case I would refer them to LDS or equivalent as feedback alone is not sufficient). The greatest amount and priority for feedback is therefore usually given to students who can be helped with specific, constructive comments and guidance.’ The justification for such views is cited by a number of projects as the amount of marked assignments that are never collected by students. The literature (e.g. Winter and Dye 2004, Weaver 2006) suggests an estimate of around 20% of marked work may go uncollected.

That the variability in practice identified in the institutional reviews can be extrapolated as being typical of experience across the sector is borne out by their experience of the external examiner system: ‘External examiners also vary in their approach and some follow the technical view of assessment in policy documents and which is also prevalent in the wider sector practice, while others demonstrate a critical view of the developmental approach to assessment in their comments on feedback e.g. in offering advice for weaker students, challenging stronger students and showing an interest in viewing feedback on draft work.’

In student focus groups, perceptions of marker variation are widespread. Students identify variations in the quality, quantity, tone and timeliness of feedback. They describe feedback which at one extreme does not refer to criteria and is subjective, and at the other is criteria-led but so depersonalised as to be considered ‘cut and paste’ from other comments to students. Students also raise consistency of assessment demand as an issue with variability for similar credit modules being common. For example, some 20 credit modules demand more from students than 30 credit ones.

Timeliness

The timeliness of feedback appears to be a key issue across the board. Many schools/departments do set deadlines for marking and the return of feedback but there remain issues with the overall assessment timetable and whether students receive feedback in time for it to be useful in preparing for the next assignment. Where this does occur there is substantial evidence that students do appreciate and act upon feedback: ‘My tutors are often good at giving me more general feedback that is transferable to other assignments or modules’ but, even with goodwill on both sides, there are often structural issues that get in the way of this type of longitudinal development: ‘Some of my modules, especially at stage three and PGT, are assessed by only one piece of assessment, in line with widespread practice in the School. Therefore, my feedback on those pieces obviously does not reach students in time to be used for future assessment on this module.’
For many institutions achieving a shorter turnaround time is therefore crucial. As one institution stated: ‘There may be situations where students might accept a trade-off between the quantity of feedback and the time it takes to produce, but in other cases rapid feedback may be more important than great detail.’ Another noted that: ‘There may be a trade off between the rapidity and quality of feedback so that, for example, imperfect feedback from a fellow student provided almost immediately may have much more impact than more perfect feedback from a tutor four weeks later.’

Institutions are looking at both technical and non-technical solutions to the problem and it has been suggested that disaggregating grades and feedback might be beneficial in a variety of ways: ‘Delays to feedback on marked assignments limit learning for students and disaggregating grades and feedback might be a solution. This would enable first markers to send provisional feedback to students as soon as a piece is marked rather than waiting until grades have been agreed and sent to the Examination Board. … Grades can have a negative influence on learner response to feedback and this is another reason for disaggregation. The process could be automated to improve the speed of delivery of feedback to students.’

**Longitudinal development**

Related to both of the above issues is the extent to which feedback supports the ongoing development of the individual learner by feeding forward into their future learning, ‘… an underlying problem with many assessment regimes [is] that assessments are undertaken on a piecemeal basis and that there is little continuity. Feedback tends to focus on the immediate task and not surprisingly does not routinely include feed forward to future assessment.’

To some extent the ability to achieve this depends on the quality of the feedback given and whether it is developmental in nature rather than simply justifying a grade: ‘Feed forward can be provided which identifies generic themes which can be applied to future assignments. It is particularly helpful if these generic points are illustrated with examples from the current work or exemplars of correct practice rather than being too general. An emphasis on feed forward also encourages the assessor to move away from giving excessive praise and/or correcting errors towards facilitating future learning.’

There are however structural issues that can provide barriers to this type of development. Many institutions have identified a range of curriculum design related issues arising from the modularisation of academic programmes e.g. ‘… repetition of assignment types across a course, clustering of assignments around dates and duplication or incomplete assessment of particular course learning outcomes.’ that mitigate against effective longitudinal development.

In other cases it is the scale of the programme and the nature of the course team that can cause issues: ‘Due to the size and nature of the [programme name] we employ a distributed model of marking where staff not related to the design and teaching of a module assess students’ work and provide feedback. The problems created by such a model are that there is no continuity in terms of establishing a relationship with the student or a shared context for the assessment task.’

Learners require multiple sources of feedback/forward and one of the skills for learners to acquire is how to balance all these. Tools such as e-portfolios for recording reflections, plans, actions, achievements etc can assist in this process and help manage support across multiple modules/tutors.

A number of the projects in the programme are looking at ways to better facilitate the joining up of the overall learning experience. One project is looking to develop the concept of an ‘assessment career’ building upon a range of previous research including work on ipsative assessment whereby feedback acknowledges progress against the learner’s previous performance regardless of achievement (Hughes et al 2010) and another is aiming for process change to provide a longitudinal overview of feedback provided and student reflection on previous assignments. A further project is focusing on whole programme transformation to support coherent approaches to student learning through assessment design focused at the level of the degree programme rather than the module.

It has also been suggested that learners would benefit from a more longitudinal approach to the development of skills needed to ensure their employability (more on this topic below). ‘Using a curriculum approach which aims to build skillsets on top of each other through a programme, for example, perhaps starting with ‘basic’ skills such as creating CVs and adding more complexity through the years, eventually learning more complex skills such as goal identification.’
Employability and assessment

Graduate employability is a major issue for institutions and students alike and is an important focus for a number of the projects in the programme. Although the ways in which assessment and feedback promote employability are inextricably linked with all of the other issues of practice discussed above (particularly around authentic assessment) the baseline reviews have raised some interesting observations and questions.

The difference between the institutional emphasis on summative assessment and the more formative ways in which professionals develop throughout their careers (including through extensive use of peer review) is noted: ‘Assessment in business is much more about ongoing, formative feedback, from clients as well as peers. Although there is some formal summative assessment, for example exams required by professional bodies, this comprises only a small amount of the overall evaluative practice within business.’ In conversations with employers conducted as part of the baseline review, it was occasionally necessary to clarify that the term ‘assessment’ related to evaluative processes in order to frame the review questions in an appropriate context.

The review led one institution to question the appropriateness of much current practice: ‘Our own assessment systems seem to focus more and more on summative forms as you progress closer to employment - raising the intriguing notion, do we approach assessment the wrong way round? Should we actually be focusing on forms of assessment that are closer to those found in employment, i.e. formative and authentic, as our students get nearer and nearer to the beginning of their professional careers. Our current assessment practices seem to be aimed at producing an overall mark that summarises how well a student has performed over the past 3 or 4 years, a single benchmark that it seems is increasingly meaningless to employers looking for attributes which will allow them to distinguish individuals from the crowd.’

Their thinking indeed went so far as to challenge received wisdom that greater definition and clarity in relation to marks and grading is necessarily a good thing: ‘What emerged was the notion of business clients as assessors, and the critical notion that in a business scenario you do not know exactly what you will be assessed on. Indeed, it could be said to be part of the assessment itself, in a business context, to work out exactly what is expected from you based on the client and the information that they may or may not be providing.

This raises the challenging question: Are we being too specific in detailing exactly how students get marks from our assessments? Should part of the assessment be the task of working out which are the more crucial parts of the assessment itself? It seems that assessment in business is a cumulative and ongoing process with mostly undefined criteria that must be independently discovered, so in order to make our own assessments more authentic we may need to reduce the level of definition we create about mark allocation.’

The same team noted that employers tend to talk as much about attitude as about skills and they relate this to the ways in which challenges and pressures in the world of work can be quite different to those in education and they go on to say: ‘This may have a direct relevance to assessment, in terms of requiring students to complete assessments not because they are of direct benefit to them, but because they are of indirect benefit to them. An example might be completing a formative evaluation of a peers work, in order to receive a formative evaluation of your own.’

The notion that employers may not be looking for the specific skills and competencies assumed by many institutions came out in other reviews as well. One project, that undertook extensive employer consultation, concluded that the whole area of digital literacies and supporting learners to develop and maintain their virtual identities is of far more significance than training them to use specific tools (the JISC Developing Digital Literacies programme is indeed finding that the concept of ‘digital influence’ is becoming of increasing importance to employers). The same institution commented on employer engagement generally in assessment and feedback processes ‘Employer involvement in the assessment process may be described as patchy, and practice varies between faculties and modules. When it does occur, such involvement adds a degree of authenticity to the practice …’
Learner engagement in assessment and feedback

There is little in the baseline reviews that helps build an overall picture of learner engagement in relation to the design and development of assessment and feedback practice. Although it may be unwise to draw conclusions from this, it is tempting to feel that the silence on the topic tells its own story.

The limited evidence available does however hint at a disjunct between staff and learner expectations. One institution conducted a survey across three subject disciplines and one of the areas covered was ‘Students are formally consulted about assessment during the design process.’

The staff results were aggregated across all of the subject disciplines and fewer than half of the staff (43%) felt it was important or very/extremely important that ‘Students are formally consulted about assessment during the design process.’ and only 13% felt this was mostly/fully happening.

The percentage of students who felt that this was important or very/extremely important was however markedly higher across each of the disciplines at 72%, 80% and 70%. Although the students were more positive than the staff about the extent to which such consultation was actually occurring (29%, 41% and 38% felt this was mostly/fully happening) the difference between the relative importance placed on this by staff and students does appear quite significant.

One member of staff was moved to make a comment which helps explain the thinking behind their (probably atypical) response: ‘… if the assessment for a module is an essay (a fairly standard and expected form of assessment) there is no need to consult students about it at the design stage; that consultation is better suited to more unusual forms of assessment.’

In the same survey quoted above there was stronger agreement about the importance of actively engaging students with assessment criteria indeed 100% of staff felt it was important or very/extremely important that ‘All marking criteria are shared with students in advance and feedback refers to them’

Many of the projects in the programme take the view that learner engagement is central to what they are trying to achieve: ‘… if students do not have opportunities to engage with criteria and standards, this will hamper development of their assessment careers.’

‘Students need to be given the opportunity to take part in the processes of making academic judgements to help them develop ‘appropriate evaluative expertise themselves’ and make more sense of and take greater control of their own learning’ See also the interesting discussion on criteria in relation to the section on ‘employability and assessment’.

Active and meaningful engagement with learners is certainly a significant feature of many of the projects in the programme and there will be considerable interest in the evidence these projects are able to produce of the benefits arising from such involvement.

As well as revealing an apparent gap around learner engagement, the reviews do not readily emphasise the role of student induction or training in terms of preparing learners to get the most from assessment and feedback e.g. covering topics such as enhancing reflective practice, evidence collection, planning, action, self-review etc.
Processes supporting assessment and feedback

In assessment and feedback, as in many other areas of learning and teaching practice, institutional processes can act in either as barriers or enablers to continuous improvement. We have already noted the varied ways in which institutional strategy is translated into more localised policy and it can be argued that it is the processes and procedures that stem from these policies which have the greatest impact on day-to-day practice. In the case of assessment and feedback the resource costs are so high, and have such visibility, that it is unsurprising that processes are coming under scrutiny and the dual emphasis of the programme, in enhancing the learning and teaching process and delivering efficiencies and quality improvements, reflects the ambitions of many institutions.

The baseline reviews have mapped a range of related processes at institutional and local levels providing a rich body of evidence about widespread issues with existing processes and opportunities for improvement. The variability in policy between different areas of the same institution is matched by a similar degree of variation in process although a common feature across very many of the processes examined is the extensive amount of manual intervention required. Another common issue is the administrative difficulty of tracking student progress through the assessment landscape when there is often little information other than a recorded grade at the end of a module.

Quality Documentation

It is evident that formal quality assurance documentation has a big impact on practice. One institution that reported a general lack of awareness of the varied approaches that could be taken to assessment stated ‘It is interesting to note though that the compulsory inclusion of formative assessment in the module descriptor templates has raised its profile significantly, and is a very effective way in which to prompt the wider audience to rethink its inclusion within their modules.’

Other institutions do however tell a familiar story relating to implementation of policy and procedure: ‘Evidence from staff and students suggests that the technical requirements for assessment in formal documents are interpreted inconsistently.’; ‘A small survey of 14 programme leaders from the [Faculty name] was consistent with the student accounts of variation in practice.’

One institution reviewing its quality assurance documentation made the interesting observation: ‘...everybody involved in learning and teaching except administrators are positioned as having a stake in assessment practice.’ It is certainly the case that administrative staff views seem to be under represented in the baseline reviews with a number of institutions identifying them as stakeholders without having undertaken any specific engagement activities with them at the review stage. There is nonetheless evidence that some aspects of practice appear to be more focused on administrative convenience than pedagogic principles e.g. ‘For ease of scheduling and to minimise disruption in the exam hall, Schools are asked to have exams that are one, two or three hours long and not to include 10-15 minutes reading time.’

Baseline data from one project showed that programme leaders preferred to implement changes ‘under the radar’ of quality assurance procedures because of tight regulatory frameworks which limit and prevent innovation on a large scale. This data also indicated that ‘fast track’ QA procedures to support innovation for externally funded projects are useful mechanisms but do not necessarily translate beyond the life of a project. Assessment for measurement and accreditation is enshrined and valued in QA procedural frameworks, but the space for assessment for learning is ambivalent and discretionary. Even creating mandatory ‘formative assessment’ boxes in QA validation documents may not be sufficient to transform practice on the ground, without shifts in the culture and discourse of assessment. The baseline data from this project demonstrated that working with teams, evidence, narratives and educational principles began to give academics the confidence and courage to be innovative as whole teams and to challenge some regulatory myths and problems which QA structures may have spawned.
Assessment Timelines

A 'modelling tool' that has proven useful in reviewing assessment practice, and particularly identifying issues with the overall assessment timetable, is the concept of assessment timelines as developed by the ESCAPE project at the University of Hertfordshire. This is used to model patterns of high medium and low stakes assessment across a 12 week semester. An example is shown below:

A typical example of assessment:

![Assessment Timeline Diagram]

One institution that undertook this type of modelling across a number of disciplines identified that some subject areas exhibited a significant reliance on end of semester high-stakes assessment that did not offer opportunities for formative feedback. This is by no means unusual and was indeed the rationale for developing the tool in the first place.

As well as having pedagogical implications, the frequent emphasis on summative assessment towards the end of the teaching programme has implications for the workload of both students and staff as well as the supporting processes. One institution has undertaken some modelling from its coursework submission database and identified significant peaks in assignment submissions (the highest being around 17,000 individual submissions due at the end of March 2012). Even where such peaks are well-managed to the extent that individual learners do not have multiple assignment deadlines falling at the same time, they have major implications for academic and administrative staff workload.

Baseline data from another project showed that when this pattern was revealed through the TESTA methodology, a minority of programmes decided to run year long and stranded modules to break the pattern of two assessments per module, and develop habits of slow learning while providing more opportunities for low stakes formative assessment.

Submission and Marking

The extent to which processes for submission and marking of assignments are standardised and/or supported by technology again varies widely. One institution has a coursework recording system which is used to create personalised assessment schedules for each student for the academic year and deal with assignment handling. In the same institution however, 'Marking of coursework is carried out by unit teams according to their own arrangements and criteria and there is no institutional level oversight of the process.'

Another is implementing an Online Coursework Management Project with the ultimate aim of creating an institution-wide end to end electronic assessment solution to replace current paper submission, marking and feedback of student assignments.

In other institutions the entire process design is left very much to local discretion even though the institution may have the infrastructure to support a more standardised approach. One institution reported considerable variation in approach between schools. In one case a manual submission process was in place (and again elements of the processes appear to be based more on administrative expediency than learner support): 'To ensure the anonymity of coursework the School Office is closed at 12 noon on submission days and the staff check that student names and numbers do not appear anywhere on the students’ work.' In other schools within the same institution however all coursework is submitted electronically and staff are required to mark online.

Issues around electronic submission and marking (often conflated although they are very different propositions) have been around for many years and show few signs of becoming less contentious. One institution notes: 'For work which is based on the written word, there is a large variation in
practice across the institution in terms of procedures for submission and marking. One faculty takes in all work for part-time postgraduates electronically, to reduce the need for students to come specially to campus, but administrative staff then print it all out for marking, and gives health and safety concerns around online marking as the reason for this.

In the same institution there are examples where course teams are happy with electronic submission but students have to submit a paper copy as well to meet the requirements of the coursework receipting system. In yet another department double submission is required because academics wish to mark using a paper copy but also require an electronic copy to be submitted through the plagiarism detection system.

As well as the obvious resource implications associated with these processes, there are also issues of fairness/parity as highlighted by one institution: 'During the summer period, there is a dependence on the use of the postal system to send out information about re-assessment and to receive re-submitted assignments. This leads to delays which may unfairly disadvantage international students, or in some cases result in them never receiving critical re-assessment information.'

Even where institutions are making good progress in developing and implementing online systems, there appear to be difficulties to be resolved in handling assignments that are not based on paper/written word and this is an area where more research and examples would be valuable.

**Technologies supporting assessment and feedback**

A wide range of technologies are used to support assessment and feedback in a variety of ways ranging from infrastructure to support the formal processes to tools to improve the learning experience and make assessment and feedback more engaging. Most of the institutions who undertook the baseline reviews have a variety of technologies at their disposal although in a number of cases it proved difficult to establish exactly how widely some of the tools were used. There is also considerable variety in the extent to which the technologies are integrated e.g. most institutions are using plagiarism detection software and some have this integrated with their VLE whereas others do not. The reviews tended to focus on technologies/systems in use and there was little mention of the potential for greater use of data standards to support progression and transition.

As part of the baselining process, all projects were required to undertake a review of previous JISC work and other related projects in this area. There were therefore many references to examples of effective and innovative uses of technology e.g. video and audio feedback and use of social media from these projects. Although some of the institutions reported offering training in a range of tools, none appeared to indicate that any of the approaches reviewed in the innovation projects were already commonplace in their own organisation apart from one who appeared to be making fairly widespread use of Facebook ‘Many teachers have started holding regular 'office' hours on Facebook and making themselves available to answer students' questions.'

One project is building on previous work to develop its use of Electronic Voting Systems (EVS) to support a range of teaching, learning and assessment settings. Another institution reported statistics on use of voting handsets across its different schools during one semester in 2010/11. Three schools had their own handsets but of the centrally booked equipment only one School had made significant usage of 36 bookings whilst 8 other schools had used the handsets between 1 and 4 times.

A number of the projects are still in the process of identifying technologies that may help them achieve their pedagogic objectives but, on the whole, the projects are tending to work with technologies that are already well-established. One institution described its approach as seeking sustainable activity in relation to:

- Using existing technologies
- Using technologies identified as relevant to employer need
- Using technologies considered within reach and which are accessible by tutors and learners

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

One institution felt that students tend to be as conservative as staff in relation to the use of technology for formal assessment: ‘Currently, of 18 learner PESD module groups examined only 1 group (5.5%) has opted to deliver the assignment in a format other than a word document. This group opted for a powerpoint presentation. The assignment brief makes clear that students may use a technology of their choice yet it is clear that students elect to stick with traditional platforms/formats.’

There was limited mention of the use of technology to support the examinations process although one project is developing its use of Questionmark Perception (QMP) to support formative assessment. This is on the basis of limited trials of the software in two examinations during 2010/11 where: ‘Despite the noted benefits, the activity of using QMP for examinations was not considered a useful way forward.’ One institution noted that a proposal in its technology enhanced learning strategy to establish a working party to look at the key issues around delivering online exams had not yet been taken forward. The institution concerned did however appear to be moving forward with online exams in some areas and to have some guidance material available. Another reported making QMP available for both formative assessment and examinations and noted that the level of adoption varied greatly between different departments (with the heaviest users being subjects related to medicine).

A number of institutions are looking at where technology can support the administrative processes behind assessment and feedback. One institution reported having a very basic infrastructure at present: ‘The [institution name] technical infrastructure relies primarily on the use of email, shared servers and a Virtual Learning Environment to support assessment. Assignments are commonly submitted by email, stored on shared drives that make them accessible to markers, marked manually or using editing applications such as Word, and then written feedback provided (again, in Word) and emailed back to students.’ in another case, where the institution had a much richer mix of technologies, the basic infrastructure still appeared to raise issues as this comment from a student shows: ‘Have done an online submission once. Not practical as the email can only cope with a very small number of bytes. Need to empty entire mail box to send anything of any size – ridiculous.’

One institution, as already noted, is implementing an Online Coursework Management Project with the ultimate aim of creating an institution-wide end to end electronic assessment solution to replace current paper submission, marking and feedback of student assignments. Another institution looking to improve its online assessment and submission system is also intending to produce a "Dashboard" in order to: ‘… provide data to staff (such that student support can be enhanced), and also provide a portal for students to view their own learning (such that students are able to better see their overall performance and self-regulate their study patterns and study behaviours accordingly).’

One institution that conducted an extensive literature review in order to identify opportunities to learn from the application of technology elsewhere concluded: ‘There is clearly a role for technology in supporting a longitudinal approach to assessment through improving record keeping, providing exemplars or patterns and facilitating learners in engaging with feedback. However, technological solutions will not necessarily improve the quality and usability of feedback and this may require staff development. … We also note that small scale innovations by enthusiasts do not necessarily lead to large scale adoption and the scalability and sustainability of a new approach or framework for assessment is paramount.’

Staff development

Another potentially significant omission from the baseline reviews is discussion of how the institutions approach staff development in relation to assessment and feedback or any relationships with sector networks and/or special interest groups. It is evident there is a considerable quantity of high quality good practice guidance available within institutions but little evidence as to how staff are encouraged to engage with and apply the guidance.

Only one of the institutions specifically states that its postgraduate certificate in higher education teaching is mandatory for all new staff who do not already hold a similar qualification and covers assessment and feedback practice. Other courses on technologies to support assessment and feedback are offered but appear to be optional and the institution also makes reference to ‘Lunchtime Forums and other events provide examples of good practice from within and without the University.’
One project includes in its aims mentoring and building communities of practice amongst practitioners in similar disciplines. Another states that ‘All Schools will be offered the opportunity to engage with and begin to implement change in their practice by August 2014.’ The implication is that many institutions are relying on a bottom up and organic approach to change.

The extent to which practitioners are able to engage with these opportunities is likely to be mixed. One member of academic staff states ‘I have the sense that even the most committed teachers, have little time to access formal training. Most new practice is introduced into the department through new members of staff attending the PGCHET, and even at that some members of staff do not completely utilise this information.’ There are references to staff being ‘overloaded’ and ‘doing their best to keep afloat’. The comment ‘I’m not trying to say there aren’t people in the department implementing new initiatives - it’s just that the time we have to do this is really very squeezed.’ is probably very typical of the situation many practitioners find themselves in.

One institution reports on a previous version of its learning and teaching strategy stating: ‘… it is noted that “innovative practice […] exists in a number of Schools”, which should be shared more widely. The reason for not sharing to date is attributed to “the lack of structures enabling such activity” rather than the failings of staff.’ Another reported that, although staff were aware of the good practice guidance offered by the institution to encourage innovative and varied assessment design, they found the guidance too generic and struggled to apply it to their own discipline. The lack of effective structures to support the sharing of good practice on an institution wide scale appears to be a recurring theme throughout the reports: ‘… exciting and inventive practice is buried deep in the institution with little opportunity for others to learn from what innovators have done to address concerns about quality or administration.’ This is particularly disappointing when one looks at the bigger picture of the range of experience and innovation on an institutional scale e.g. ‘… there are 93 different assignment types being used across the institution in 2011/12. Many of these represent ways of addressing employability, sustainability and inclusive practice which are relevant and interesting to other programmes.’

In another baseline study, the locus for staff development has been the disciplinary programme team meeting with educational developers/researchers, where discussion around evidence, student voice, and survey data about particular programme assessment issues has been a catalyst for rethinking assessment design and practice. Key principles in this process have been robust and compelling data from students, documents and leaders of the programme, and the negotiation of the meaning of that data around key educational principles about assessment and feedback. Fifteen programme teams have undergone this process in the partner institutions, with the result that changes have been made, discussion has taken place, and the assessment discourse has started to shift.

**Accessible assessment and feedback**

Most of the institutions noted the role played by support services in ensuring that students with disabilities were treated fairly throughout the assessment and feedback processes. One institution went significantly further than this stating that ‘The overall aspiration of the institution is to minimise the need for adjustments by having standard assessment practices which are inclusive. The University is working towards universal approaches to teaching and assessment which reduce the need for special arrangements for disabled students, and any changes in practice will be evaluated with specialists in this area such as our Learner Development service, the TECHDIS service and with disabled students.’
Summary and Conclusions

One of the institutions participating in the baselining process noted that ‘Despite many years of student surveys which identify low levels of student satisfaction with assessment and feedback (Williams and Kane 2009), practice remains stubbornly resistant to change.’ and their observation seems to be borne out by the wider review. The report paints a picture of a sector that has identified some significant issues and the need for change but which is grappling with the mechanisms to deliver that change in the face of other pressures. It is evident that those looking to change practice need to understand the level of ‘change-readiness’ within their organisation and also to identify the most effective means of engaging stakeholders in the change process in their particular context.

Although the quotes and examples used here are necessarily selective, they are based on a very large body of evidence that appears to be reflective of current practice as a whole. As one institution put it ‘There is evidence here that [institution name] practice on assessment and feedback is a microcosm of sector practice.’

There is a growing body of literature and empirical evidence on what constitutes effective support for learning and some excellent examples of the innovative use of technology to deliver that support. There are some seminal works, such as REAP, that are influencing thinking right across the sector and there are pockets of good and innovative practice in every institution. If this report paints a somewhat gloomy picture of practice as a whole it is a reflection of the difficulties inherent in scaling up and embedding the good practice that exists in these small pockets. The reader is referred to the assessment and feedback pages in the JISC Design Studio and the JISC publication ‘Effective Assessment in a Digital Age’ to find out more about the many excellent examples of good practice that already exist.

One project created a Rich Picture mapping the assessment and feedback landscape in its own institution and in relation to the wider sector. It described the map of the territory as follows: ‘The sector practice includes two provinces which are strongly defined and these are the technological innovation in assessment and feedback and the good practice guidelines which draw on wider research and theorising of assessment for learning. The overall sector practice is less well defined and is represented on the map as a large area of uncertainty and danger in the current climate of retrenchment and funding cuts with high mountain ranges and sea monsters’. It is to be hoped that the assessment and feedback programme, by supporting some examples of large-scale change and by developing effective channels for sharing lessons learned will serve to build roads and bridges between these two provinces. There is a sense that the sector is approaching something of a tipping point where a combination of the various pressures for change and the growing body of evidence for the benefits of new approaches will deliver the momentum for a significant shift.

One institution described a growing sense of the need to respond to opportunities that were slipping through its fingers and it sums up the overall conclusion of the baseline review very well: ‘From this comparison we can conclude that the expertise and the potential for assessment and feedback reform exists at [institution name], but at present resources are not being put to best use. An overarching theme is one of missed opportunities for enhancing learning through assessment. However, there is evidence that a technical approach to assessment has begun shifting towards a more developmental one and this suggests that the time is ripe for change.’
References


