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# Practitioner Research in Higher Education

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## Assessment Special Edition

### Editorial

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This issue of *Practitioner Research in Higher Education* focuses on investigation and innovation in assessment in higher education and includes papers on formative assessment, on involving students in assessment and on developing transparency in assessment criteria and processes. All of the papers were originally presented at the Assessment in Higher Education conference at the University of Cumbria, Carlisle in June 2008.

The assessment for learning initiative (Black & Williams, 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Williams, 2003) emphasises the significance of formative assessment, in which learners find how to improve their work and teachers gather feedback that may be used to modify their teaching. Assessment for learning has had a considerable impact on practice in UK schools. It has been somewhat reconstructed and extended during its application to higher education. In the modular programme structures that currently prevail in UK higher education some development has focused on providing more formative assessment for students during modules. In addition a slightly different approach attempts to make the apparently summative assessments of each module, which may be experienced by students as primarily for certification purposes, more formative. This aims to change tutor feedback on assignments to become feed forward as it guides students towards success in their next assignment. Helping students to become more skilful and knowledgeable as assessors, to understand how assessments are made within their subject discipline or professional field, is being pursued by efforts to make criteria more transparent and by involving students in peer and self assessment. These approaches have been characterised as assessment as learning. In some ways the terms 'formative' and 'summative' lose their distinctiveness and usefulness in a learning environment that blurs learning and assessment through an emphasis on feed forward and on assessment as learning. In pursuing a clearer definition of these terms Taras (2005) argues that formative assessment can only be in addition to summative assessment and that teachers should make that summative element explicit.

In the first paper of this issue **Poppitt and Iqbal** report on how formative tutor feedback is experienced by students in a Business School. They identify 'consistency', in terms of the frequency, nature and helpfulness of tutor feedback in different formats, as a key issue identified by students and staff.

In the second paper **Jordan** shows how the limitations of computer based assessment, including the difficulty and costs of creating assessment items that test higher level thinking, might be pushed back through the use of software that is able to use answer-matching to assess free text responses. They find the online assessment tool performs favourably in terms of accuracy when compared to mere human markers.

In the third paper **Murtagh and Baker** consider the effectiveness of a tutorial intervention to support student teachers in making use of tutor feedback on an assignment in order to inform their approach to the

The challenges of achieving consistency in the assessment of a module, completed by a large number of students with multiple markers working across two institutions, are considered by **Beattie, Gill, Wallace and Wood** in the fifth paper of this issue. They characterise the learning of new tutors joining the marking team as an apprenticeship and identify the need for independent and robust second marking to support moderation and professional learning by markers.

In the final paper, also seeking consistency in assessment but working with both tutors and students, **Clark and Adamson** develop a taxonomy for the assessment of students' personal development planning within an e-portfolio.

### **References**

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- Taras, M. (2005) Assessment – summative and formative – some theoretical reflections. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53 (4), 466-478.