

## ***Introduction to the Issue: Assessment and Feedback in the 21st Century: Lessons Learnt from the Past and Future Directions.***

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*“The ways we assess our students can really make a difference to how student learn [...]. If we find our systems do not allow us to implement a really valuable assessment innovation, for example, then we must find ways to change the system. We need to ensure that decisions about assessment strategies are based on the best available evidence-based research on assessment, rather than on custom and practice or what is easy to do” (Brown, 2005, p. 88).*

This suggestion, represented, for the two Italian authors of this editorial, Anna Serbati and Valentina Grion, one of the main stimuli, to decide to engage in an intensive research program on assessment and feedback in HE some years ago. The first step they undertook was that to open a dialogue with some international colleagues, researchers and practitioners from US, UK and Ireland, who are not only experienced researchers that had already the chance to study and research assessment and feedback practices in their context, but also people who share the same passion and perspective about the central role of students in assessment processes, including the UK author, Sally Brown.

Following on from this collaboration, together we established the international research group, "PAFIR" (*Peer Assessment and Feedback International Research group*), devoted to improving

assessment practices in higher education. This extended intercultural sharing and subsequent debate led to several initiatives such as the two conferences held in Padova in 2017 and 2018, some reciprocal study visits and Erasmus exchanges, a joint program of research and publications (Grion & Serbati in Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2017; Sambell; Brown; Race in Grion & Serbati, 2018; Sambell, Brown & Race in Grion, Serbati, Felisatti, Li, 2019 and in this issue, Li & Grion, 2019; Nicol, Serbati, & Tracchi, 2019).

Among these outputs, the current special issue represents a quite thoughtful and, we hope, comprehensive current synthesis of this pathway achieved together, as well as a new starting point for further evidence-based studies on new assessment practices in HE.

[AISHE](#), The All Ireland Society for Higher Education, dedicated to the promotion of good practice in learning and teaching, enthusiastically welcomed our offer to share our collective thoughts and research findings in the AISHE-Journal and the opening of debates on these topics across the wider international community.

With the aim of valuing both research and practices in the field of assessment and feedback, this special issue is composed of two sections of peer reviewed papers: the first is devoted to theoretical and empirical studies from an academic perspective; the second one, entitled *Conversazioni*, focuses on experiences and practices, offering a more narrative approach from practitioners' point of view.

The first section, devoted to theoretical and empirical studies, begins with the article by Sambell, Brown and Race. Building on their extensive research experience, the authors offer a broad perspective on assessment practices in HE. They discuss eight challenges aimed at supporting academics, who teach and assess students in the twenty-first century and who wish to make assessment integral to student learning, fit-for-purpose, valid and reliable, inclusive and manageable for assessors. They conclude with a call to make assessment truly authentic in order to be meaningful for students and become a valid, lifelong learning tool.

In the second article in this section, Li and Grion present a study aimed at exploring how peer assessment works and what contributes to students' learning gain. In the context of a blended Masters-level course in an Italian University, the authors analyse 41 students' responses to online surveys together with their online written interactions when they participated in a peer assessment activity, in order to identify cognitive processes that lead to learning enhancement. The authors discuss some of the benefits associated with giving and receiving peer feedback and they conclude with some significant implications for researchers and practitioners in

education, who are interested in integrating peer assessment with their teaching/learning activities.

This discussion around feedback in higher education continues with the paper offered by Nicol, Serbati and Tracchi, who present research on peer review in the context of competence portfolio preparation for university students in Education. Findings of the study show that both reviewing and receiving reviews can prompt deep reflective thinking, as evidenced by changes in the students' portfolios analysed. The discussion focuses on the value of peer review in promoting reflection, on ways of extending this method, and on its relationship with coaching practices.

In the fourth article, Aricò discusses his approach to teaching Macro-economics at the UK University of East Anglia, based on pedagogic approaches including self-assessment and peer-instruction, as well as technology-enhanced learning through Student Response Systems. Analysing qualitative data, the author identifies students' perceptions of their learning experiences when using these approaches. He highlights the effectiveness of the approach as a valid support of student learning, and as a means of enhancing their self-efficacy beliefs. He argues that his pedagogic approach seems to be especially welcomed by students coming from an international background and is particularly effective for students who are struggling with their learning.

Brady, Fellenz and Devitt conclude the first section by presenting a reflective paper from the educator's point of view, describing an experience of educational interventions using simulation games to support teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. The authors discuss three unplanned and unexpected consequences and identify lessons learnt that will be of value to academics in designing and deploying effective and meaningful technology-supported educational and assessment innovations, particularly for those which take an assessment for/as learning perspective.

The second section, called *Conversazioni* and focused on diverse experiences and practices, starts with the paper by Curtis and Anderson. Shedding light on a North American perspective on the meaning of 'assessment' as a specific method of inquiry to determine the extent to which program-level objectives are met or not met in an educational setting, the authors offer a fruitful discussion aimed at demonstrating the benefits we can obtain by linking assessment at the programme-level with students' feedback. They suggest a framework through which assessment information can change and improve both the programme and the success of individual students.

O'Neill next offers a reflection on assessment overload in higher education from an Irish perspective, considering both staff and students' assessment load. She argues that the solutions developed to reduce assessment load do not necessarily provide answers to all the complex associated issues. This conversation piece explores the topic and presents some potential actions to address this challenge at a national and institutional level, by discussing aspects including possible frameworks, professional development, streamlining assessment and feedback, the balanced use of continuous assessment and feedback and wider strategies to improve assessment literacy.

The paper offered by Fotheringham presents research findings from a longitudinal study of students making the transition from pre-HE colleges to a Scottish university with a specific focus on assessment issues. She argues that data from interviews with staff and students suggest that although students are offered pre-entry transition support while they study at college, they face further challenges, particularly in relation to assessment, when arriving at university. Her findings indicate that lecturers who take time to make their requirements explicit and create opportunities for students to understand what is valued by the university can usefully provide the key to successful transition.

Finally, the last paper by Restiglian offers an inside view of the school context, aiming at investigating learning benefits of using peer review in primary and secondary schools in Italy by learning from higher education practice. In the experience presented, her pupils were asked to review their classmates' assessment products using established criteria facilitated by teachers, and to provide each other with feedback. The teachers' written narratives and interviews, as well as the students' products and responses to three questionnaires were collected and analysed. Results so far show that teachers appreciated the peer review model as a valid instrument for making students active in their learning, thereby becoming more reflective in approaching their assignments and as a result, activating processes of self-assessment among their pupils.

Together the articles in this special issue argue for a purposeful and strategic imperative to involve students and fellow academics in our enterprise to enhance the learning and achievements of our students by making assessment truly concerned with and central to learning. We are grateful to the AISHE-J Editorial Board for hosting our research findings, discussions and reflections here as well as to all the experts, researchers and practitioners in assessment and feedback who contributed to this joint venture.

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