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Assessing Student Learning in Selected Social Sciences and Humanities Undergraduate Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study

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Abstract

This research study investigates the similarities and differences in assessment policy, perspectives and practices in relation to student learning, desirable graduate outcomes and lifelong learning (LLL) in two departments with similar disciplines: *Sociology and Social Policy* and *English Studies* of the Midlands University (MU) – UK and *Sociology* and *English Linguistics and Literature* of the Ho Chi Minh City University (HCMU) – Vietnam. The study's conceptual framework was developed from research literatures on assessment, mainly David Boud's framework of *sustainable assessment* or *assessment for longer term learning*, as the framework for data analysis. The methodology is a comparative case study, and the methods include using semi-structured interviews with 22 staff in both cases, four student focus groups, an action-based intervention at the English department of the HCMU, and document analysis. The similarities and differences across the comparative cases are explained on the basis of the economic, socio-cultural and HE contexts, while Boud's framework is reframed theoretically and operationally for these contexts, and as a guide to improving practices.

The data shows that although more elements of Boud's framework were found in the MU than the HCMU, assessment in both cases was an imperfect realisation of this framework. The argument is made that this framework can offer a good vision for the two cases to aim at in terms of changes in their assessment perspective and practices, but the framework itself should also be reframed with contextual and cultural features of assessment, as well as the development of human capabilities and functionings in order to encompass a fuller range of educational goals. It is concluded that above all assessment should support not only learning at university but also expansive rather than reductive LLL.

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Acronyms

AUN QA	Asian University Network for Quality Assurance
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
HASS	Holistic Assessment of the Student's Self-improvement
HCMU	Ho Chi Minh City University
HDI	Human Development Index
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
GCI	Global Competition Index
LLL	Lifelong learning
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
MU	Midlands University
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development
PD	Professional Development
PGCHE	Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SEDU	Staff and Educational Developmental Unit
UNDP	United Nations Development programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

1 Chapter one: Introduction

This chapter introduces my case study research, which aims to investigate the similarities and differences in assessment policy, perspectives and practices in relation to student learning, desirable graduate outcomes and lifelong learning (LLL). The case study examines different perspectives from senior managers, lecturers, and students in two departments with similar disciplines of the two universities: *Sociology and Social Policy* and *English Studies* in Midlands University (MU) – UK and *Sociology* and *English Linguistics and Literature* in Ho Chi Minh City University (HCMU) – Vietnam.

In this chapter, I will look at the contexts which my research on assessment is located, including aspects of globalisation and the knowledge economy and their impacts on relevant features of UK and Vietnamese higher education (HE), and briefly describe the two universities selected to be the research sites. Then, I will introduce the rationale for the study, aims and research questions, and summarise the chapters in the thesis.

1.1 Globalisation, the knowledge economy, and its impacts on HE

Globalisation, especially its economic dimension, brings about changes in the world of work and the market, and in this changing context, knowledge becomes the core of the global economy. In this section it is argued that economic globalisation and the knowledge economy significantly influence and shift the purpose of HE towards an instrumental one, that of education for employability, making human capital the most important output of HE (Stromquist 2002; Little 2003; Olssen and Peters 2005; Field 2006; Walker 2006; Rizvi 2007; Molesworth *et al*. 2009). The dominant discourse of globalisation, the knowledge economy and LLL is neoliberalism and especially human capital theory which over-emphasises the economic role and thus reduce the other roles of HE and diminish the meaning of learning. Based on various studies (e.g. Delanty 2001; Barnett 2006; Walker 2006; McLean 2006; Mann 2008; Booth *et al*. 2009), I propose that in addition to preparing students for employability, HE should also enable human capability formation for them to become useful citizens for a better society, and to equip them with capabilities for LLL (these capabilities will be discussed later in this thesis).

1.1.1 The economic features of globalisation driven by neoliberalism

Globalisation is a concept that has been defined and interpreted differently and controversially: some authors focus on its technological features, whereas others on cultural, political or socio-economic impacts (Stromquist 2002: 4). Dodds (2008) divides the viewpoints of globalisation into two streams: first, globalisation is considered as 'global flows' of capital, people, information, technology, and culture, and second as 'market mechanisms'. These 'global flows' bring about changes in local cultures, social relations, as well as cross-national mobility of people, thoughts, and products, and thus create more interconnection and interdependence in the world (Rizvi 2007: 120–121). As Friedman posits, globalisation causes 'inexorable integration of markets, national states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before in a way that enabling individuals, corporations and nation states to reach the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before' (2000: 14, in Rizvi 2007: 121).

While acknowledging that globalisation is a multidimensional concept, this section focuses on the second stream of globalisation – the 'market mechanism' or its economic dimension with an argument that economic globalisation, driven by neoliberal ideology, is perceived to be the major cause that influences and stimulates fierce competition in the global economy and consequently changes the labour market into one which increasingly requires high-skilled employees. This in turn affects and shifts the purposes of HE into a more instrumental one – education for employability – which is one of the key drivers of a narrow version of LLL as vocational.

Economically, globalisation and neoliberalism are interrelated; neoliberalism is considered as the ideology that drives the global market (Stromquist 2002; Olssen and Peters 2005). Neoliberalism is defined as 'a program capable of destroying any collective structure attempting to resist the logic of the "pure market"' (Bourdieu 1998, in Stromquist 2002: 6). The discourse of neoliberalism centres on minimising the role of the state, free trade, and open economies with deregulation, decentralization, privatisation, and competition (Stromquist 2002; Olssen and Peters 2005; Field 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2006; Rizvi 2007). It is essential to realize that the economic feature of globalisation 'is deeply guided by the hegemony of the market and the role of the state as a key supporter of market decisions' (Stromquist 2002: 7).

Free trade and economic deregulation have both advantages and disadvantages to developed and developing nations. Arguably, they may be beneficial to developing countries in that they enable these countries to integrate into the global market with their products and services (Toakley 2004: 313). However, they also bring about fierce competition in the global market in which powerful economic forces will play the dominant role. Additionally, the competitive global market challenges many countries to change policies in order maintain their economic competitive advantage. If domestic industries cannot compete with foreign dominant giants, they will collapse (Toakley 2004: 322). Furthermore, the state in rich and powerful countries plays an important role in protecting corporations investing overseas and in influencing developing countries to deregulate economic barriers for the developed countries' interests (Stromquist 2002: 8). Therefore, in this sense the power of the state in these countries is becoming stronger. On the contrary, the power of the states of developing countries is weakened because they fail to remain competitive in global market competition (Stromquist 2002: 8). Consequently, globalisation may be much more beneficial to developed countries in terms of economic and political dominance over their developing business partners. In order to develop its economy and maintain competitive advantage in the global market, a country needs to have an educated and skilful workforce. This makes the roles of HE and LLL increasingly important in this context because it is necessary for people continuously to learn to update and upgrade their knowledge and skills to remain employable. Issues about LLL will be discussed later in this thesis. The next sections will explore the features of the knowledge economy and how globalisation and the knowledge economy influence and shape the current trends in HE in the UK and Vietnam.

1.1.2 Features of the knowledge economy

As analysed above, globalisation brings about fierce competition in the global market, and this leads to the demands for a high-skilled workforce to maintain a country's competitive advantage. Also, together with the impacts of globalisation, advances in information communications technologies (ICTs) speed up the transformation of the economy into the knowledge economy whereby knowledge becomes central to a nation's economic growth and competition in the global market, as well as to its social development (Field 2006; Kenway *et al.* 2006).

According to Kenway *et al.* (2006: 13–14), the idea of a knowledge economy or knowledge society originated with Drucker (1959), who generated the ideas of 'knowledge worker', 'knowledge work', and 'knowledge industries' and who used the terms 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge society' in his book 'the Age of Discontinuity' in 1969, in which he focused on a knowledge base for all important aspects for a country to survive – 'for intellectual, economic, social, and military performance' – and 'that encourages everybody to become knowledgeable' (Drucker 1969: 356, 361, in Kenway *et al.* 2006: 20). Rather more narrowly than Drucker's expansive argument, the World Bank maintains that:

> A knowledge-based economy relies primarily on the use of ideas rather than physical abilities and on the application of technology rather than

> the transformation of raw materials or the exploitation of cheap labour. It is an economy in which knowledge is created, transmitted, and used more effectively by individuals, enterprises, organizations, and communities to promote economic and social development.
>
> (2003: 1)

From the World Bank's perspective, the knowledge economy comprises two key components: knowledge and technology, and knowledge plays the key role not only in economic but also in social advancement. However, it seems that the economic goals of knowledge are prioritized in many government agendas over social goals.

The knowledge economy differs from the traditional economy because knowledge 'shares many of the properties of a *global* public good', and thus should be considered as different from other commodities (Stiglitz 1999, in Olssen and Peters 2005: 335; UNESCO 2005: 23). However, it is argued that knowledge still tends to be treated as an ordinary commodity, and this leads to the 'commodification of knowledge' (Stromquist 2002; Peters 2004) which encourages the market-oriented trend of the university and a 'consumer culture' in HE (Simons *et al.* 2007; Molesworth *et al.* 2009) (this will be further discussed in the next section). The knowledge economy also differs from the traditional economy in that it emphasizes the 'economics abundance' of knowledge and information (unlike other goods, knowledge and information grow and shared when used), the reduction of distance, barrier and territory, and 'investment in human capital' (Peters 2004; Olssen and Peters 2005). Because of these differences, especially the main difference – that it is economically oriented to knowledge – the knowledge economy, as Kenway *et al.* (2006) argue, brings about some problems, including 'the scientization of society and its associated risks, the diminishment of the public sphere, modes of exchange and social bonds that are not market-based, and the commodification of all forms of life including culture and ecology' (p. 26). With the above mentioned features, globalisation and the knowledge economy have as will be shown tremendous impacts on HE.

1.1.3 The impacts of globalisation and the knowledge economy: commodification and instrumentalisation of HE

Perhaps the most significant effects are the commodification and instrumentalisation of HE that drive policy and practices of curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment at universities. As explained above, due to the influence of globalisation and the knowledge economy, knowledge and skills become increasingly important for a nation to maintain its competitive advantage in the global market, as Thurow (1996: 68, in Peters 2004: 75) maintains, 'today knowledge and skills now stand alone as the only source of comparative advantage. They have become the key ingredient in the late twentieth century's location of economic activity'. This trend demands that a nation invests in human capital in order to have a knowledgeable and high-skilled workforce, which makes human capital the output of HE. It also highlights the economic role of HE and turns the university into 'a major player in the market and in information-based capitalism' (Delanty 2001: 150).

1.2 UK HE in the context of globalisation and the knowledge economy

The UK is no exception to the global context. As one of the most developed and leading countries in economy and education in the world, the UK has its own competitive advantages in the context of globalisation and the knowledge economy. Indeed, the UK is ranked as the world's sixth largest economy, second largest in exporting services, and is characterised by its open and powerful international trading, high and most recent technology, flexible and efficient labour market, innovation and business sophistication, and high-skilled workforce (World Economic Forum 2011, 2012). However, although rising from 12thto 10th and 8th in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) rankings in 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 respectively, the country is still facing many challenges, among them are an increase in public debt and a decrease in macroeconomic environment (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 The UK's Global Competitiveness Index 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 rankings

	Rank 2011–2012 (out of 142)	Rank 2012–2013 (out of 144)
GCI = 5.39 (2011-2012), = 5.45 (2012-2013)	10	8
Labour market efficiency	7	5
Technological readiness	8	7
Market size	6	6
Innovation and sophistication factors	12	9
Macroeconomic environment	85	110
General government debt	120 (77.2% GDP)	127 (82.5% GDP)

(World Economic Forum 2011, 2012)

In addition, according to the Human Development Report in 2011, with a high standard of living in terms of health, education, and income, the UK is in the group of 'very high human development', ranked 28 out of 187 countries. However, although its Human Development Index (HDI) is much higher than the world's average, it is still lower than the OECD's average[1] (UNDP 2011a). These challenges – increased debt, decreased macroeconomic environment, and a lower than expected HDI – may weaken the country's capacities to compete with other giants, like the US or Germany. In order to maintain its leading position and competitive advantages, the key strategy of the UK government is to have a more knowledgeable and high-skilled workforce than previously. As Peter Mandelson, the then UK Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), stated:

> Skills are a key part of our plan for economic recovery and, as such, an urgent challenge. This country's future can only be built by educated, enterprising people with the right skills; the skills demanded by modern work in a globalised knowledge economy. Skilled people are more productive, they are more innovative, and they build stronger businesses.
>
> (BIS 2009: 2)

The demands to upgrade skills for a knowledge economy have put the economic role of HE at the core of the government agenda, marked first by the UK's 1997 so-called 'Dearing Report'. This Report asserts that globalisation is the main effect of British economy and the labour market and strongly influences HE (NCIHE 1997). Thus, HE should aim at sustaining a learning society in helping students to develop key skills for employability, lifelong learning, personal fulfilment, and social contribution (*ibid.*). It

[1] UK' HDI = 0.863, world's average =0.682, and OECD's average = 0.873. Other UK's HDI values: life expectancy at birth (years) = 80.2, expected and mean year of schooling =0.815, and GNI per capita = 33,296 (UNDP 2011a).

emphasises the needs for the four key kills – *communication skills, using ICT, numeracy,* and *learning how to learn* – to become important learning outcomes of HE programmes (*ibid.*).

Peters (2004) undertook an analysis of the Dearing Report and identified three interconnected functions of the *globalisation of tertiary or HE* : (i) the *knowledge* function – the value of knowledge lies in its utility, (ii) the *labour* function – HE provides a high-skilled workforce to meet the demands of the international labour market and LLL, and (iii) the *institutional* function – HE institutions should maintain their competitive advantage globally and become a good that can be traded (p.73–74). Clearly, these three functions concentrate on the economic role of HE. On the other hand, something which Peters misses in his analysis is that the Dearing Report shows a genuine concern for widening participation and HE as a social good.

Nonetheless, demands from globalisation and the knowledge economy strongly influence neoliberal policy priorities in UK HE. The commodification or business trend constructed HE as a tradable commodity or private good and encouraged the instrumentalisation of HE for employability and for contribution to national prosperity and economic growth (Stromquist 2002; Walker 2006; Mann 2008). Thus, the educational policy agenda are driven by human capital theory, and HE institutions need to be more closely connected to businesses, accountable to the public, competitive with each other nationally and internationally, and offer 'value for money' (Walker 2006; Rizvi 2007; Molesworth *et al*. 2009). This also turns the two standards – how graduates are valued for the job market and how they contribute to the competitive advantage of the state's economy – into measurements of HE success (Booth *et al.* 2009: 929). Driven by these neoliberal policies, the UK HE system is governed and informed by quality assurance, the National Student Survey (NSS), and the national programme specification learning outcomes. From Table 1.2, UK HE can be depicted as having:

- a high rate of students' course satisfaction;
- excellence in research with the number of global top ranking universities only coming after the US;
- a high proportion of international students' enrolment; and
- a significant contribution to economic development in the UK and the region.

(BIS 2011a; HEFCE 2011)

Table 1.2 Some characteristics of UK HE

Tertiary education enrolment	57.4% (GCI = 36)
Availability of research and training services	GCI = 7
Research excellence	Ranked 2nd globally
Students' course satisfaction – NSS survey 2010	82%
World's market share of international students	12%
Increasing income from knowledge exchange activities between HE and other sectors	35% (from £2.28 billion in 2003–2004 to £3.09 billion in 2010–2011)
Contributing to the UK economy	£59 billion in 2007–2008

(BIS 2011a; HEFCE 2011)

Yet, by putting too much emphasis on human capital, HE policy at the macro level might be said to have neglected social capital. Thus, a number of researchers (Delanty 2001; Rowland 2006; McLean 2006; Walker 2006; Mann 2008; Booth *et al.* 2009) call for the inclusion of the social, cultural, and ethical, in addition to the economic role of HE. As Booth *et al*. argue that there are 'three valid multidimensional goals of a university education: for economic wealth and individual prosperity; for individual fulfilment and transformation; and for citizenship in a democracy' (2009: 929). For them, university education aims not only at the development of national economy and individual earnings, but also at human capability formation for a fair and democratic society. Therefore, in UK HE, there is a perceived tension between education for a knowledge economy at policy and managerial level and education for a broader personal development at the micro level (Mann 2008; Rowland 2006; Walker 2006). Thus, it is inevitable that one of the focuses of these practices is to equip students with skills and capacities for employability and national wealth, yet university lecturers are also concerned about educating for rich human beings.

HE policy at a macro level to drive a knowledge economy translates into policy and practices at a micro level so that teaching, learning, and assessment practices in universities are informed by the wider context. Therefore, at the institutional level, assessment policy and practices partially emphasise the purposes for certification and developing key skills for employability, as guided in the Code of Practice by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

(QAA 2006). However, another more important emphasis of assessment is to inform and improve learning and teaching. Thus, at the micro level, formative assessment, especially formative feedback, is encouraged to be used to support student learning (Havnes and McDowell 2008). Such focus on formative assessment at the institutional level is also highlighted by the Burgess Group's suggestion to replace summative assessment with 'a more sophisticated approach that better represents the outcomes of student learning and encourages personal development and understanding the context of LLL'(2007: 9). (Issues about summative and formative assessment will be discussed later in chapter two).

1.3 HE in Vietnam in the context of globalisation and the knowledge economy

Turning now to the context of Vietnam, a developing country, the flow of the world's technology development, marketisation and globalisation brings tremendous growth, changes and challenges. Historically, Vietnam has gone through different tragic and challenging stages with continuous wars and struggles against foreign invasions[2]; resisted assimilation and colonisation to maintain its national identity; and yet has tried to turn international influences and the recent impacts of globalisation and the knowledge economy to its own advantages, especially in the economic aspect. Doi moi (Innovation) policies, which were presented at the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist

[2]Wars and struggles against the Chinese domination and invasions in the feudal time (111BC – 1850s), the French colonisation (1850s – 1945), nine years in wars against the French's return (1945-1954), the Vietnam War between the North and the South under the Saigon regime and the American (1954- 1975), the post-war and before Doimoi (innovation) period (1975 – 1986), and the Doimoi period with economic and educational reforms (1986 – present) (Pham and Fry 2004b; Pham 1998).

Party in December 1986, have been implemented since then to move the Soviet-styled central planning economy towards a market-oriented economy with more privatisation and openness to the outside world (Doan 2005; Hayden and Lam 2010). This has provided Vietnam with opportunities to acquire global knowledge through ICT, develop the economy and enhance international trading and cooperation. The country has also carried out important economic reforms, such as privatising businesses, removing trade barriers, and encouraging foreign investment, which, together with 2007 WTO participation, have paved the way to poverty reduction and better integration into the global economy (Hayden and Lam 2010).

These efforts resulted in rapid economic development and competitive strengths, including significant increases of 227% in Gross National Income (GNI) per capita from 1990 to 2010[3] (UNDP 2011b), a moderately efficient labour market and large market size, especially in export (World Economic Forum 2011, 2012). However, Vietnam is also facing many challenges. Among them are high rates of inflation and a serious decrease of macro-economic environment, as well as low quality of infrastructure, which partly caused the GCI in 2012–2013 to drop 16 places compared to 2010–2011 (see Table 1.3).

[3] from $855 to $2,805 in this period (UNDP 2011b: 2).

Table 1.3 Vietnam's Global Competitiveness Index 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 rankings

	Rank (out of 142) in 2011 – 2012	Rank (out of 144) in 2012–2013
GCI = 4.2 (2011-2012); GCI = 4.11 (2012–2013)	65	75
Labour market efficiency	46	51
Market size	33	32
Macroeconomic environment	65	106
Inflation	124	141
Quality of overall infrastructure	123	119

(World Economic Forum 2011, 2012)

In the Human Development Report 2011, although Vietnam is categorised as a medium human development country and its HDI value has increased 37% from 1990 to 2011, such improvement has been mainly driven by economic growth and there exists a considerable gap in standards of living between rich and poor provinces[4] (UNDP 2011b: 2). Also, the HDI and values in income and education are still lower than other countries in the region, such as Thailand and The Philippines, and below the medium HDI and in East Asia and the Pacific (see Table 1.4). This may weaken the country's competitive strengths. Significantly, its fast economic growth is mainly based on low-skilled labour and exploiting natural resources (Harman *et al.* 2010), which makes it difficult for sustainable development. Therefore, Vietnam needs to improve its educational system, especially HE, and have a higher-skilled workforce to meet the demands of globalisation and the knowledge economy and to sustain the country's development in the long term.

[4]e.g. HDI = 0.805 in Ba Ria – Vung Tau and 0.538 in Lai Chau in 2008 (UNDP 2011b: 2)

Table 1.4 Vietnam's HDI indicators for 2011 compared with other countries

	HDI value	HDI rank	Mean years of schooling	GNI per capita (PPP USD)
Vietnam	0.593	128	5.5	2,805
Thailand	0.682	103	6.6	7,694
Philippines	0.644	112	8.9	3,478
East Asia and the Pacific	0.671	-	7.2	6,466
Medium HDI	0.630	-	6.3	5,276

(UNDP 2011a: 3)

Indeed, Vietnamese HE has been open to internationalisation and to some extent has managed to turn influences from abroad to its own advantages. Due to its historical context, the system can be characterised as being strongly influenced internationally by the Chinese, French, American, Russian perspectives and practices and recently by globalisation and the knowledge economy. Vietnam has strategically borrowed and transferred educational models, policies and practices from other countries in an attempt to improve its HE. However, Vietnamese HE tends to be left behind by other countries in the region, such as Thailand and the Philippines, in enrolment and availability of research and training services, though its quality seems acceptable (see Table 1.5).

Table 1.5 GCI in higher education and training: comparing Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand

Indicators	Vietnam		The Philippines		Thailand	
	Value 1-7	Rank /142	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Higher education and training	3.5	103	4.1	71	4.2	62
1. Tertiary education enrollment, gross %	9.7	110	28.7	75	45.0	54
2. Quality of the educational system	3.7	69	3.8	61	3.6	77
3. Availability of research and training services	3.1	119	4.2	62	4.1	74

(World Economic Forum 2011)

Recent changes in the socio-economic context under the impacts of globalisation and internationalisation lead to innovations in the Vietnamese HE system: diversity in forms of institutions – (e.g. public, private, semi-public and open universities, community colleges); the establishment of the accreditation system for HE; the implementation of the credit system for more flexibility in student learning; improving university lecturers' professional development by sending them to study overseas; more internationalisation of HE through twinning programmes with overseas institutions or foreign universities establishing their campuses in Vietnam; and so on (Harman *et al.* 2010; Hayden and Lam 2010). Significantly, Vietnam has set key objectives for the period 2006 – 2020 in its Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA):

(i) increasing the gross enrolment rate up to 45% and the number of qualified teaching staff with doctoral degrees from 15% to 35%;

(ii) improving research at universities from 2% to 25%, decentralising the HE system;

(iii) better integrating with global HE by way of a more internationalised curriculum, international cooperation and foreign investment in HE; and

(iv) having at least one university in the world's top 200 in 2020.

(MOET 2006a)

These objectives show Vietnam's commitment and aspiration to improve its HE system. Yet, the agenda is ambitious and there is still a big gap that needs be bridged between aspiration and reality (Marginson 2008; Harman *et al.* 2010; Harman and Nguyen 2010). Arguably, at present, as the first steps to prepare for achieving these objectives in the HERA in the long run, Vietnam may need to do more to solve many problems: more autonomy for universities and lecturers; improving the curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, and resources (teaching and learning, financial, and human).

In addition, recent innovations in Vietnamese HE influenced by changes in the socio-economic context tend to put more emphasis on changing the system and curricula than teaching and learning, and assessment tends to be paid the least attention in the innovation process. Thus, the assessment system is still traditionally exam-based. Among few current changes in assessment policy are the MOET's Resolution 25 on *Organising HE Teaching and Learning for Regular Students* in 2006 and Resolution 43 on *HE Training in the Credit-based System for Regular Students* in 2007. These resolutions make initial move in assessment policies and perspectives from summative assessment to formative assessment in encouraging the use of internationally borrowed alternative assessment methods as one of the subordinate assessment components during the learning process in addition to the dominant final exam. However, there are no clear guidelines, examples, or professional development (PD) courses for lecturers about what and how these methods are employed. Therefore, it may be useful to look at other assessment systems in developed countries, like the UK, as examples for potential assessment changes in Vietnamese HE.

To sum up, I have mapped out some key features of the UK and Vietnamese HE systems in the context of globalisation and the knowledge economy and how contexts influence changes in HE, especially in assessment. In the next section, I will briefly describe the two universities – the MU, UK and the HCMU, Vietnam and two selected departments there – English and Sociology – as the research sites.

1.4 Description of the two universities

The selection of these two universities and departments was based on accessibility and some essential common features as follows:

- *Quality and internationalisation trends*: Both universities have good reputations and put a strong emphasis on internationalisation. The MU is one of the highly-ranked, internationalised, and research-based universities with campuses both in the UK and overseas. Similarly, the HCMU is one of the most prestigious universities in Vietnam in the process of change for better integration into international HE by way of more focus on research and internationalisation. With reference to the selected departments, as stated on their websites, Sociology and English are among the most highly-ranked and innovative in both universities. For example, at MU, recent changes have been made at these departments to improve feedback and assessment standards and criteria. At HCMU, the Sociology and English departments were among seven departments in the University selected as examples to self-evaluate their undergraduate programmes with ASEAN University Network for Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) standards in 2008 in order to develop the internationalised curriculum based on these standards (HCMU 2010)[5].

- *Similarities in subject disciplines*: The Sociology and English departments of both universities share more similar undergraduate programmes and common subjects in their curriculum than other departments. Other similar subject disciplines, such as Education or Geography, might not become good comparators due to more differences in their programmes.
- *Accessibility*: Sociology and English are the two departments I could gain access for the research. Other departments might also have been good comparators; yet getting access to them was problematic. For example, History was previously one of the choices due to similar undergraduate programmes; however, I was rejected by this

[5] Other departments include: Vietnamese Literature, Anthropology, Oriental Studies, History, and International Relations, selected out of 18 departments at HCMU (HCMU 2010)

department at MU. Also, the HCMU's Vietnamese Linguistics and Literature department might have been a good comparator to the MU's English department because both offer Linguistics and Literature courses in their mother tongues. Nonetheless, it was much more difficult to gain access to the HCMU's Vietnamese Linguistics and Literature department because I did not have any contacts there. Thus, the HCMU's English Linguistics and Literature was chosen, and potential limitations of that choice could be the differences in the nature of English in the two countries. That is, English is the mother tongue in the UK case but in the Vietnamese case, although this degree is taught in English, English is still a foreign language. Therefore, in terms of native languages, the HCMU's Vietnamese Linguistics and Literature department could be comparable to the MU's English department. However, apart from accessibility, other above-mentioned common features of the English departments at the two universities, such as high quality, the emphasis on internationalisation trends, and similar subjects in their curriculum, might be the strengths to help reduce these limitations.

For these reasons, the MU and HCMU and the Sociology and English departments were chosen for the research, and they will be characterised in the following sub-sections.

1.4.1 The MU – UK

Established in 1881 as the first civic college in the area, the MU is now a large university, including five faculties – Arts, Engineering, Medicine and Health Sciences, Science, and Social Sciences – with 52 departments, 2,950 academic and research staff, and 23,980 undergraduates out of 32,999 students at its UK-based campus in the academic year 2010-2011 (MU 2010a). It was in the top ten in the UK and top 75 in the world by the QS World University Rankings for its excellence and innovation in teaching and research (MU 2011). With commitment to better students' learning experience, the University gained the highest student satisfaction in its history with the overall score of 87% in the NSS 2010 survey (rank 30th), rising 12 places compared to 2009 (42nd), especially with more improvement in assessment and feedback and academic support, the two aspects that were ranked the lowest in the 2009 NSS survey (MU 2011). In terms of research, the MU was in the top 10 in the UK by the Research Assessment Exercise – 90% international quality and 60% 'world-leading' research in 2008. As stated in its strategic plan 2010 – 2015, the University will carry out a mission as:

> providing a truly international education, inspiring our students, producing world-leading research and benefiting the communities around our campuses. Our purpose is to improve life for individuals and societies worldwide. By bold innovation and excellence in all that we do, we make both knowledge and discoveries matter.
>
> (MU 2010a:5)

In doing so, the University pledges to maintain its excellent education and research and to be committed to providing the highest teaching and learning standards and outcomes and better students' learning experience. It also claims to put internationalisation at the core by increasing student numbers in its campuses overseas and international students in the UK-based campus; by creating more partnerships in international teaching and research, and by encouraging student outward mobility by studying abroad.

The departments selected for the MU case study are *English Studies* and *Sociology and Social Policy.* Table 1.6 provides brief information about these departments, and more details can be found in chapters five and six.

Table 1.6 Brief information about the two selected departments of the MU

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2"></th><th>English studies</th><th>Sociology and Social Policy</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Established in</td><td>1881</td><td>1948</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Number of teaching staff</td><td>42</td><td>39</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Number of final year students</td><td>240</td><td>117</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">BA programmes</td><td>English; English Language and Literature; English with Creative Writing; Viking studies; and English Joint honours.</td><td>Sociology; Social Policy; Sociology and Social Policy; Cultural Sociology; Film and Television studies and Cultural Sociology; and Social Work and Social Policy.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Programme Structures:

-Three years.

-Modular system with 360 credits (120 credits/year).</td><td>Year 1 (students must pass)</td><td>Five core modules = 100 credits.
Elective modules = 20 credits</td><td>Five core modules = 100 credits.
Elective modules = 20 credits.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 2 (50% of the final degree classification)</td><td>Four core modules = 80 credits
Elective modules = 40 credits</td><td>Four core modules = 80 credits.
Elective modules = 40 credits.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year 3 (50% of the final degree classification)</td><td>Six final year elective modules (20 credits/each); or five final year elective modules + a dissertation (20 credits)</td><td>Dissertation = 40 credits
Elective modules = 80 credits.</td></tr>
</table>

(MU's English Department 2010a; MU's Sociology Department 2010a)

1.4.2 The HCMU – Vietnam

The HCMU was established in 1955 with 18 departments, 507 teaching staff, 467 visiting lecturers, and 19,708 undergraduates (in which there are 9,202 regular[6] students) out of approximately 31,000 students. It is one of the largest universities in Vietnam with a mission:

> [T]o become one of the leading teaching and research universities in social sciences and humanities in Vietnam, provide high quality educational and social science services for the national economy, and contribute to develop the Vietnamese culture to become advanced and rich in national identity.
>
> (HCMU 2010: 1)

This mission shows an emphasis on research, aiming to become a research university in the future, which departs from the tradition of Vietnamese universities that only focus on teaching and leave research for research institutions operating independently from universities. In order to carry out its mission and the policies issued by the MOET, the HCMU has recently implemented important changes. These include: transforming a year-based into a credit-based system to bring about more flexibility and transferability; establishing a Self-evaluation Board and starting to self-evaluate undergraduate programmes according to the standards set by ASEAN University Network for Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) in 2008; and launching more twin programmes with other foreign universities, courses on Vietnamese language and culture for foreign students, student exchanges, and sending lecturers to study overseas. Changes in teaching methods are also encouraged, especially using IT in teaching, group discussions, and group presentations

[6] There are some forms of education for undergraduates in Vietnamese HE, mainly regular students who take a highly competitive university entrance examination and study full time and ‘ in-service training’ students who take another less competitive entrance exam and study at night.

together with lectures, and occasional professional development courses for lecturers. In addition, since the second semester of the academic year 2007–2008, courses taught by young lecturers have been occasionally attended by other experienced staff in the departments to give feedback later on how to improve their teaching, and all courses are also evaluated by the students to get their opinions as one of the sources to adjust the curriculum, teaching and assessment (HCMU 2011). These innovative efforts aim at improving the teaching and learning quality, better integrating into the regional and international HE, and increasing internationalisation, which are the objectives of the University's 2011-2015 strategic plan (HCMU 2011).

At HCMU, departments of *Sociology* and *English Linguistics and Literature* were selected for the case study with brief information shown in Table 1.7. More details about them can be found in chapters seven and eight.

Table 1.7 Brief information about the two selected departments of the HCMU

		English Linguistics and Literature	**Sociology**
Established in		1955	1995
Number of teaching staff		44	20
Number of final year students		253	182
BA programmes		*Linguistics and Language Teaching; Culture and Literature*; and *Translation and interpretation.*	*Sociology*
Programme Structures: *4 years*. *Credit-based system*. Total: 140 credits.	General Education (Semester 1–3)	52 credits (Vietnamese general core = 20, English general core = 28, elective = 4).	40 credits (General core = 14, Sociology general core = 14, elective = 12).
	Specialisation (Semester 4–8)	88 credits (Core= 60, dissertation or graduation exam = 10, elective = 18).	100 credits (Core = 70, dissertation or graduation exam = 10, elective = 20).

(HCMU's English Department 2010a; HCMU's Sociology Department 2010a)

In brief, this section has described main features of the MU – an established international 'world-class' university with a reputation for excellent teaching and research; and the HCMU – a university in the process of reconstruction and innovation to improve its teaching and learning quality. It has also provided brief information about the two departments selected for the case study. The following sections will explain the rationale for the research, aims of the study and will outline the research questions.

1.5 Rationale for the research

Working as a lecturer in Education at a university in Vietnam, I wish to contribute to the process of innovation in Vietnamese HE, especially in the field of assessment. As assessment plays the central role in shaping how students learn and informing teachers and students about teaching and learning, I believe that improving assessment may lead to improving teaching and learning. However, as above-mentioned, assessment in Vietnamese HE is still dominated by the summative, exam-based system and the utilisation of marks to inform learning. This, to some extent, may help students improve their learning, yet may not be sufficient to equip them with other necessary skills and capacities for life after university, such as team work, oral communication, the capacity to judge others' works, and so on. In addition, the launch of MOET's Resolutions 25 and 43 encouraging the use of borrowed alternative assessment methods without guidelines can cause confusion and difficulties for lecturers. Thus, lecturers might not apply these methods or just use them based on their own experience. Significantly, there is a lack of research on assessment in Vietnam, especially on the implementation of internationally borrowed alternative assessment methods and how effective it can be. This poses more challenges to lecturers in the implementation process.

Therefore, I decided to do this comparative case study between Sociology and English undergraduate programmes at the HCMU – Vietnam and the MU – UK because I believe that the marriage of traditional assessment with strategies borrowed from Western assessment perspectives, policies, and practices may help reform the assessment regime in Vietnamese HE and encourage changes in assessment that support students' present and future learning; and because I recognise the need for guidelines and examples of how these perspectives, policies and practices can be utilised in different national contexts. Since the MU is one of the high-quality and top ranking universities in the UK, I believed that, with its outstanding programmes as well as good assessment policies and practices, the MU would offer good examples for the HCMU to improve student assessment, which may lead to improved curriculum, teaching, and learning in Vietnamese universities.

In addition, when reading about assessment, I encountered David Boud's concept of 'sustainable assessment' or 'assessment for longer term learning', which refers to assessment not only for certification but also for supporting learning at university and LLL (Boud 2000). I decided that his framework of sustainable assessment with four main conceptual features – *(i) 'being sustainable', (ii) 'developing informed judgement', (iii) 'constructing reflexive learners',* and *(iv)* '*forming the becoming practitioner's* – and eight key elements for practice – '*engaging students, integrative activities, authentic activities, students designing assessment, learning and judgement, modelling and practice, working with peers*, and *giving and receiving feedback'* – (Boud 2009b, 2010a, c) might be useful for assessment policy and practices in the two cases. Therefore, a part of my aims in this research is to look at how useful it was.

1.6 Aims of the study

This study therefore has three main aims:

(i) to investigate and explain the similarities and differences in assessment policy, philosophy and practices in relation to student learning, desirable graduate outcomes and LLL in these two departments of the two universities, thereby

(ii) to contribute to assessment development at the UK university and help reshape traditional assessment policies, philosophy and practices at the university in Vietnam.

(iii) to evaluate how useful Boud's framework is for assessment in the UK and Vietnamese cases.

1.7 Research questions

There were five questions that guided the research:

1. What are the features of current assessment policies at the level of the University and in Social Science and Humanities undergraduate programmes under conditions of globalisation and internationalised HE at the MU – UK and the HCMU – Vietnam in respect of
   (i) student learning
   (ii) assessment and desirable graduate outcomes
   (iii) assessment and lifelong learning.
2. What are the assessment philosophies and practices of lecturers in selected Social Science and Humanities departments of the MU and the HCMU in relation to
   (i) student learning
   (ii) desirable graduate outcomes
   (iii) lifelong learning.
3. What are student experiences of assessment at selected departments of the two universities? In what way (if at all) has assessment developed

them as lifelong learners?

4. How do we explain the similarities and differences of these assessment policies, philosophies and practices, and the impact and effect for student learning? Which conceptual framework provides robust explanatory power?
5. In light of these similarities and differences, to what extent is Boud's framework of sustainable assessment useful theoretically and operationally for the two case study contexts, and as a guide to improving practices?

1.8 Summary of the chapters

This thesis has ten chapters, including this introduction. Chapter Two reviews the literatures on student assessment in HE, with the focus on formative assessment, and three key aspects of formative assessment that foster students' learning: feedback, self-assessment and peer assessment. The main argument in this chapter is that most contemporary assessment research in HE centres on assessment to improve immediate learning at the university and thus, there is still little space for assessment to prepare students for learning in the longer term after graduation.

Chapter Three provides theoretical perspectives on student learning, graduate outcomes and LLL, as well as establishing the conceptual framework of Boud's framework of Sustainable Assessment or assessment for LLL to argue for a more expansive model of LLL instead of the human capital model and for assessment that not only supports immediate learning but also LLL.

Chapter Four is a critical narrative of my research journey, which was challenging yet interesting and rewarding in which the following issues are discussed, justified and critiqued: epistemology and theoretical perspective, comparative research, positionality of the researcher, methodology and methods, as well as the data collection and analysis process.

Chapters Five and Six detail the findings from the MU case based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews of 11 senior managers and teaching staff, two final year student focus groups, and policy document analysis. Chapter Five describes and explains some distinctive features of assessment in the two selected departments of the MU, including the assessment methods in the two departments, features of the marking process, including mark moderation and double marking, marking criteria and guidelines, and how they help improve student learning. It also identifies key constraints that may hinder alternative assessment, as well as issues about professional development. Chapter Six looks at the extent that the five elements of Boud's Western-generated framework – *(i) engaging students and working with peers, (ii) integrative and authentic activities, (iii) learning and judgement, (iv) modelling and practice,* and *(v) giving and receiving feedback* – can be found in the assessment practices of the English and Sociology departments in MU, especially through the alternative assessment methods applied by the interviewed lecturers in their own courses. The idea is to judge to what extent assessment at these two departments prepares students for LLL.

Chapters Seven and Eight present the findings from the Vietnamese case based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews of 11 senior managers and teaching staff, two students' focus groups, and an action-based peer feedback intervention, and document analysis. Chapter Seven describes and explains some distinctive features of assessment in the two selected departments of the HCMU and the findings from the peer feedback intervention at the English Department. Chapter Eight explores similar issues for the Vietnamese case as for the UK case on operationalising Boud's framework.

Chapter Nine compares and contrasts the two cases in terms of their key assessment features and the operationalised elements of Boud's framework, as well as looking at them through the lens of the four main theoretical features of Boud's framework – *(i) being sustainable, (ii) developing informed judgement, (iii) constructing reflexive learners*, and (iv) *forming the becoming practitioner* in order to judge to what extent assessment at these two departments prepares students for LLL. It also provides the explanations of these similarities and differences on the bases of the economic, socio-cultural and HE contexts of the two cases, as well as evaluates and reframes Boud's framework theoretically and operationally for the two contexts and as a guide to improving practices.

Finally, Chapter Ten is a short conclusion that sums up all the main points and arguments of the thesis, suggests implications for policy and practice, and identifies the contributions of the study and further research.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the background to the research which features globalisation and the knowledge economy. It has explored how context influences and helps form characteristics of both the UK and Vietnamese HE, especially assessment policy and practice, in different ways. The UK HE teaching, learning, and assessment are shaped by neoliberal policy highlighting education for employability and economic development at the macro level and by lecturers' emphasising education for rich human beings at the micro level with a focus on formative assessment and feedback. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese HE teaching, learning, and assessment are driven by a traditional exam-based system in the process of reform with international borrowed assessment methods. The two universities – the MU, UK and the HCMU, Vietnam, as well as the two selected departments – Sociology and English, have been briefly described as the research sites. The chapter has explained the rationale for the research with an emphasis on the central role of assessment in teaching and learning and the needs for looking at assessment in the two systems comparatively with the hope that the research findings will help change assessment in Vietnamese HE. The aims and questions of the study and a summary of the chapters in the thesis have also been provided. The next chapter will review the literatures on assessment in HE.

2 Chapter two: Reviewing the Literatures on student assessment

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews theoretical works and empirical research on assessment. It first discusses the need for change and reconceptualisation of assessment from assessment *of* learning (summative assessment) to assessment *for* learning (formative assessment). It then focuses on exploring the roles and features of feedback and empirical research on innovating feedback to improve student learning, as well as self-assessment and peer assessment. Based on the literatures review, I suggest that most contemporary assessment research in HE centres on assessment to improve learning at the university with little consideration for assessment to prepare students for LLL.

2.2 Assessment: the need for change

Assessment has tremendous impacts on student learning. Boud (1995: 35) has highlighted the significant role of assessment and put it above teaching: 'Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition, if they want to graduate) escape from the effects of poor assessment.' In fact, assessment is perceived to be at the core of the student learning experience: arguably it decides students' learning motivations, priorities, approaches and strategies more than the teaching and curriculum do (Maclellan 2004; Gibbs 2006; Boud 2007). As Ramsden (1992: 187) posits: 'From our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum'. In other words, assessment has a '*backwash'* effects on students' learning because their choices of what and how to learn are based on what and how they are assessed (Murphy 2006; Biggs and Tang 2007). To put it briefly, assessment plays the key role in shaping student learning because ill-advised assessment can spoil the beneficial effects of good teaching.

Although assessment plays a central role in student learning, it is still '"the Achilles" heel of quality' (Knight 2002: 107). This metaphor is clearly proven by the results of the UK National Student Survey in 2006-2007: students' satisfaction with formative assessment practices, especially feedback, was at the lowest level (Nicol 2009; Price 2009). As students' learning is directly influenced by assessment, in order to improve learning, there should be innovations in assessment. However, I need first to consider how has assessment been changed, researched, and debated as shown in the literatures. The next section will explore this question with a focus on the distinction between formative and summative assessment.

2.3 Formative assessment versus summative assessment

For the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2006), assessment in HE refers to 'any process appraising an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities, or skills' and is used for various purposes: supporting student learning through feedback, appraising students' 'knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills', as well as grading and certifying students' achievement (p. 4). Thus, there seems to be two main purposes of assessment: 'assessment *of* learning' (summative assessment) and 'assessment *for* learning' (formative assessment). For Wiliam (2009), the terms 'assessment *of* learning' and ‘assessment *for* learning’ refer to the purposes, whereas ‘summative assessment’ and ‘formative assessment’ are about its functions.

Summative assessment is perceived as rooted in a ‘*testing culture’* (Havnes and McDowell 2008) with examinations as the dominant discourse of assessment. According to Havnes and McDowell (2008), examinations began in Europe in the late 18th century for gaining access to professions, government and universities. In the UK, exams started as a limitation to entry to the professions (for example, medicine, law, and accounting) in the early 19th century as entrance exams to British universities in the mid-19th century, and were used in the school system from the early 20th century. Thus, assessment has been traditionally used for a selective purpose and ranking the students, making ‘assessment as measurement’ the first assessment paradigm (Serafini 2000; Havnes and McDowell 2008). ‘Assessment as measurement’ is posited to be based on ‘behaviouristic theories of learning’ in which assessment is used to measure scientifically students’ ability and achievement against norms rather than criteria (Serafini 2000; Shepard 2000). This paradigm is characterised by Falchikov as ‘norm-referenced standardized testing where objectivity, standardisation and reliability take priority over other concerns, including teacher and student involvement’ (2005: 60).

Originated from such a ‘*testing culture*’, it is argued that summative assessment strongly influences student learning in that students tend to consider grade point average as their main learning goal (Boud 2007; Kvale 2007). This might result in learning being reduced to achieving good grades, and students might practise strategies to do their tests or exams better, rather than intending to acquire knowledge and understanding. Significantly, Boud (2007: 17) points out that in summative assessment, learners may be turned into 'passive subjects' for others to measure and classify. Summative assessment is also criticised for its decontextualisation and separation from, rather than continuity and integration into, the teaching and learning process (Maclellan 2004; Biggs and Tang 2007).

However, it is argued that to some extent summative assessment may be helpful for student learning and development. For Black and Wiliam (2009), summative assessment obtains proof of students' achievements and when suitably used, can bring about useful feedback for future learning, and as such it communicates 'criteria for success' (p. 8). Also, summative assessment has been considered as an important quantitative and statistical tool to provide students with scores and qualification, as well as assure quality and accountability for the universities. There appears to be some good reasons then why summative assessment still seems to be dominant in many universities in spite of its limitations. Although changes have been made, including more alternative assessment methods and formative feedback to foster student learning, there still exists an unbalanced relationship and a tension between summative and formative assessment (Hounsell *et al*. 2007; Yorke 2007). According to Hounsell *et al.* (2007), there is still much concentration on summative grading and certification of students' performances and insufficient attention for formative feedback; consequently, assessment fails to foster student learning as much as it might do. For Yorke

(2007), the tension between summative assessment and formative assessment is of two connected types: firstly, several assessments are both formative and summative, and secondly, students focus on '(summative) grade' and thus neglect 'the formative feedback' (p. 3).

Therefore, researchers call for assessment innovation, keeping more balance and interconnection between summative and formative assessment, implementing more changes in policies and practices of formative assessment, especially on feedback and self-assessment and peer assessment, in order to enhance learning in HE (e.g. Black and Wiliam 1998, 2009; Hounsell *et al*. 2007; Hounsell 2009; Nicol 2009, 2010; Price *et al.* 2010). These issues will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

2.4 Formative assessment: theoretical perspectives and empirical research

An extensive meta-review of over 250 studies of formative assessment in classroom practices by Black and Wiliam (1998) identifies key issues for assessment that supports learning: (i) students need to compare and close the gap between their actual progress and achievement and required criteria and standards; (ii) teachers should believe that all students will be successful and treat students in that way, and students need to be confident in their own abilities to learn and achieve their learning goals; (iii) feedback plays the central role in formative assessment and is beneficial when it is given without grade, compares students' performance with standards, and is used to improve learning; (iv) more emphasis should be put on self-assessment and peer assessment; (v) for formative assessment to be effectively used, teachers need to change their mindset about teaching and classroom practices.

However, as Black and Wiliam (2009: 5) point out, this meta-review still lacks 'a theoretical base' which has been gradually built on their later works, such as Black and Wiliam (2006, 2009) and Wiliam (2009). Wiliam defines assessment for learning as:

> [A]ny assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their pupils, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.
>
> (2009: 8)

On these bases, Black and Wiliam (2009) are able to introduce a framework of formative assessment including five main tactics: (i) clear learning goals and criteria; (ii) encouraging communication and interaction in the classroom; (iii) giving feedback that aims at guiding and improving students' future performance instead of informing faults in their past performance; (iv) developing students' ability to be self-regulated learners who can take ownership of their learning; and (v) encouraging students to work collaboratively, support, and learn from each other through different cooperative learning activities and peer assessment.

From the definition and these main tactics of formative assessment, it is clear that feedback is at the core of formative assessment and that self-assessment and peer assessment also play an important role in promoting student learning. The definition, features, role, theoretical views and research on innovating feedback will be discussed in the next sub-sections.

2.4.1 Feedback

According to Price *et al.*, feedback is generally used without a clear definition of its meaning and includes five main roles: '*correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, bench-marking, and longitudinal development*' (2010: 278). For them, '*Correction*'– detecting and correcting things to make them right – and '*reinforcement*' – using feedback as an incentive to strengthen behaviours – are considered as restricted roles of feedback because they fail to capture complex and multi-faceted performances demanded by HE assessment (*ibid.*). Therefore, in addition to correcting errors, the other three roles are emphasised: identifying problems of a student's performance, finding out the gap between present performance and standards, and looking forward to improving future performances (*ibid.*). Similarly, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick identify seven principles for good feedback practice:

1. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
2. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
3. helps clarify what good performance is
4. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
5. delivers high quality information to students about their learning
6. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
7. provides information to teacher that can used to help shape the teaching.

(2006: 108)

From these seven principles, it is clear that good feedback must aim at constructing self-regulated and forward-looking learners, as well as encouraging teacher-student and peer communication; thus good feedback helps develop both learning and teaching. Both Price *et al.* (2010) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) emphasise feedback as future orientation or 'feed-forward'; that is, providing guidance to improve students' performance in the long term. Therefore, formative feedback is considered as the decisive factor of students' learning progress.

In spite of the benefits that feedback brings to student learning, there has been growing concern about the problems with feedback practices in HE. Especially, students' satisfaction of feedback has been ranked the lowest among the teaching and learning indicators in the National Student Survey (NSS) each year since it was carried out (Hounsell 2008; Nicol 2010). Hounsell (2008) made similar findings about feedback in the *Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environment* project – a survey in four divergent subject areas at 11 universities funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – mostly, students are dissatisfied with feedback. Hounsell (2009) identifies 16 problems with feedback, among them are: outdated feedback (unable to keep up with new technology); too late and de-motivating feedback; students do not understand feedback and do not know how to use it effectively; fewer staff – student interactions than previously; staff are not sufficiently trained to give helpful feedback; and, too much emphasis on exams and thus less space for feedback. Also, he remarks that the importance and position of feedback are not adequately attended to by academic departments or faculties (Hounsell 2007).

Hounsell calls for integrating feedback into the teaching and learning process and making it an ‘outcome of HE’ (2007: 110). He also suggests various ways of improvement, including: new methods of enhancing feedback (e.g. audio, video, online, and so on), more communication with students about feedback, ‘feedback-rich assignments’, and so on (Hounsell 2009: 31–32). Especially, he emphasises reconceptualising feedback to enable students’ participation and engagement (*ibid.*). From a ‘dialogical’ stand, Nicol (2010) argues that the effectiveness of written feedback needs to be built on ‘dialogical contexts’ with teachers and students exchanging ideas about feedback, and on the four features of ‘effective dialogues’ by Laurillard (2002). These are: ‘*adaptive*’ – depending on students’ demands, ‘*discursive*’ – strong teacher-and-student ‘two-way’ communication, ‘*interactive*’ – connecting to ‘actions related to a task goal’, and ‘*reflective*’ – promoting teachers’ and students’ reflection on the ‘goal-action-feedback cycle’ (Laurillard 2002, in Nicol 2010: 503). He also suggests enhancing dialogues among peers, using ‘peer critiquing’ and ‘collaborative assignments’ which may help to shift the feedback model from ‘teacher delivery of feedback’ to ‘co-construction of feedback’ (p. 515). Thus, both Hounsell and Nicol highlight the reconceptualisation of feedback with students’ active engagement in the feedback process. Given the importance of feedback to learning and teaching, its problems and the needs for innovation, how to improve feedback has become the primary concern of recent assessment research.

- Research on innovating feedback to improve student learning

According to Higgins (2000:2), it is difficult for the students to achieve effective learning from feedback due to their insufficient understanding and misinterpretation of feedback comments. This is also shown in other research on students' perceptions on feedback. A survey research of 44 students in the faculties of Business and Arts Design using both qualitative and quantitative methods by Weaver (2006) shows that feedback fails to improve student learning when it is negative, unclear or not detailed and unconnected to assessment criteria. It was also found from this research that students lacked guidance on feedback before entering university: only 25% of these students received such guidance. Thus, Weaver suggests that it may be necessary for students to be advised on understanding and using feedback before engaging with it and that tutors' comments should be carefully explained.

Based on Weaver's findings, Burke (2009) explored students' perceptions on the guidance of using feedback students received from their teachers at school or college with a questionnaire study on 358 students of a School of Humanities, Languages, and Social Sciences. From the study, Burke found that only 40% of the students received feedback prior to HE, but many of them did not clearly understand or receive guidance on using feedback. Burke pointed out that there was a gap between the staff's assumption and the reality: students did not understand and know how to use feedback whereas staff assumed that they did. Burke argued that this gap should be closed and called for the identification and development of strategies of using tutor feedback so that students could use it more effectively to improve their learning.

Similarly, Murphy and Cornell's (2009) focus group study on students' and teaching staff's perceptions on feedback at three UK HE institutions surrounding the four main themes – time, communication, student/tutor relationships and transitions – contained evidence of students' struggling in HE (e.g. large cohorts, heavy workloads), their lack of understanding of academic language used in assessment, tight time frame to use feedback in students' work, less student-staff communication on feedback. Thus, these researchers suggested more effective communication of staff's 'implicit understanding of feedback' to the students and using formative assessment or other innovative assessment methods to bring about more student-staff communication in order to possibly foster more confidence and bring about 'a sense of achievement' for first year students.

However, there is no guarantee that providing feedback alone will increase standards of students' work. Students' use of feedback rather depends on their choice: some students realise the importance of feedback and make good use of it, whereas others do not bother reading or using it. This is shown by Crisp (2007) research on 51 undergraduate social work students in Australia on the extent students use their assessor's feedback. It was found that while one third of the students made good use of feedback to revise their essays and received good results, two thirds of them did not use feedback to change and improve their work. On the other hand, research by Higgins *et al*. (2002) on how students understand and make use of feedback in HE told a different and more positive story about students' perceptions of feedback. The data collected from semi-structured interviews with 19 students and administering questionnaires to 94 students at two universities showed that tutors' comments were read and valued by the students and these students used feedback conscientiously for 'deep' learning. Thus, students' experience and use of feedback can be varied in different contexts.

Encouraging students to engage with feedback is also what the Higher Education Academy's Fund for the *Development of Teaching and Learning* (FDTL) project conducted by Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe) of Oxford Brookes University, using semi-structured interviews with 35 students and staff, 776 students questionnaires, 24 case studies (Handley *et al.* 2008). The research points out several reasons why students are not engaged in feedback: they fail to understand feedback due to jargon used in feedback or when feedback is unrelated to the assessment criteria. The findings from the projects show that the staff did pay attention to and employ different feedback methods as an attempt to get the students engaged. However, like other above-mentioned studies, students do not understand clearly about feedback purposes, and thus students' and teachers' perceptions of 'useful' feedback seem not to match with each other (Handley *et al.* 2008). Also, student engagement relies on how useful they think feedback will be, and this is linked to their ability to understand feedback, their anticipation of using it in future and their confidence in their ability to use it (*ibid.*). In addition, the ‘relational dimension of the feedback process’(e.g. the tutor, the student, the context they are in, and so on) has a strong influence on whether students want to talk to tutors about feedback (*ibid.*:6). It was also found from the research that resource availability and university policies may enable or constrain staff commitment to students and student feedback and that students need to be guided when entering HE. Based on these findings, the project suggests some important implications to engage students in the feedback process. Among them are: helping students recognise ‘the broader purpose of feedback’; integrating feedback practices into assessment policies and approaches in modules and programmes, creating an encouraging environment of feedback engagement in order for students to realise the importance of feedback; training staff in feedback provision, dialogue engagement, and assessment practices development (Handley 2009: 9).

These findings of the FDTL5 project share some similarities with the above-mentioned studies by Weaver, Burkes, and Murphy and Cornell about students’ ability to understand feedback, confusion of purpose, and students’ problems with transition into HE. However, it differs from these studies in that it emphasises the issues about ‘dialogue’ between tutors and students about feedback, its ‘relational dimension’, ‘perceived utility’ (Handley *et al.* 2008: 6). Also, the five above-mentioned suggestions for feedback engagement provide important implications and guidelines for the innovation of feedback and also of assessment.

Exploring methods of promoting communication between teachers and students about assessment and feedback without bringing teachers heavier workloads is the primary concerns of some recent research. Bloxham and Campbell's (2010) experimental research on enhancing dialogues between teachers and students used interactive cover sheets with an extra section asking students to write about specific points of their assignments they wanted feedback on. It was found that this approach motivated students to reflect on their assignment. However, students might not have eloquent dialogues with the teachers due to lack of understanding about teachers' expectations and standards. Bloxam and Campbell (2010) suggested that this could be improved by maintaining and promoting the current discussion on assessment with peers. The research called for more ways to encourage students' confidence in engaging in a dialogue with teachers. Handley and Williams' research (2011) also aimed at stimulating tutor-student and peer dialogues on feedback. They posted assignments with annotations on WebCT as exemplars for students to comment, question, and discuss with tutors and peers on the discussion board before the submission of their final assignment. This approach was considered by students as helpful guidelines for them; however, there was no evidence that this practice brought about improvement in students' work in terms of grades.

This raises concerns about the factors that influence the effectiveness of feedback. In a focus group research on undergraduate students about their views on feedback and its effectiveness, Poulos and Mahony (2008) pointed out that ‘effective feedback’ depended on not only how and when it was given but also on students’ perceptions of the lecturer who gave feedback and, for first year students, whether it helped them in terms of emotion and integration in university education. Using semi-structured interviews, Price *et al.* (2010) investigated the effectiveness of feedback on supporting them to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of their performance for future improvement. They concluded that exact measurement or simple indicators such as in the NSS survey could not fully evaluate the effectiveness of feedback due to the complex and multi-dimensional nature of feedback and evaluators’ insufficient ‘pedagogic literacy’ (Price *et al.* 2010: 288). Thus, they suggested that evaluation on the effectiveness of feedback should involve both lecturers and students in which students should played the key role. However, students should be equipped with ‘assessment literacy’ in order to be able provide ‘informed judgement’ on the effectiveness of feedback (*ibid.*). This resonates with Sadler’s (2010) argument that students should be supported to form ‘critical background knowledge’ to enable their capacity for understanding and using feedback effectively, as well as finding out what needs to be improved in their own work (p. 535).

In brief, the research shows that feedback is beneficial to learning and teaching. However, they also identify problems and suggestions on how to improve feedback and the feedback process. In addition to feedback, self-assessment and peer assessment are also key aspects of assessment for learning, and they are what I will explore in the following sections.

2.4.2 Self-assessment

'Self-assessment' refers to learners making judgements of their own work or performance (Taras 2010). It plays a significant role in forming students' capabilities for self-regulation and judgement, which are perceived as necessary for their learning not only at, but also beyond universities. According to Tan (2007), the importance of student self-assessment has been highlighted by several authors (e.g. Bartels 1998; Stefani 1998; Dochy *et al*. 1999; Patterson *et al.* 2002) with the argument that it not only fosters students' present learning but also LLL after graduation because it encourages students' development of critical ability – making their own judgements and self-reflection – and self-directed learning, and these are fundamental capabilities for LLL (p. 114). As such, these authors argue for self-assessment to be one of the key aims of HE. However, in the literatures, compared with feedback or peer assessment, empirical research on self-assessment seems to be limited. Among recent studies on self-assessment are Andrade and Du (2007), Lew *et al*. (2010), and Tan (2007).

Andrade and Du's (2007) investigated undergraduate students' experiences with self-assessment against criteria, using focus group interviews. The findings showed students' positive attitudes towards self-assessment: students could self- assess in the condition of clear guidance; they were willing to apply self-assessment in revising their work, and they were aware that self-assessment helped increase their marks and promote learning. However, students were still confused about their own standards of good work compared with those of their tutors. The research also pointed out that self-assessment was ‘a complex process of internalisation and self-regulation’ (p.159).

In two studies, Lew *et al*. (2010) looked at how accurate students’ ability for self-assessment was in comparison with the assessment of peers and tutors. They also explored whether such ability developed over a period of time and was influenced by students’ beliefs on the usefulness of self-assessment to their learning. The first study was carried out on 3,588 first-year students in a HE institution, each of whom wrote about 80 self-assessment pieces which were then assessed by their peers and tutors during one semester. The findings showed that there was ‘weak moderate accuracy of student self-assessment ability’ (p. 135); good students tended to be more accurate in their self-assessment, and accuracy did not improve during the semester. The second study used a questionnaire for 936 first-year students to investigate their perceptions on the usefulness of self-assessment. It was found that students’ view on how useful self-assessment was did not influence their ability of assessing themselves accurately.

Tan’s (2007) study explored academic conceptions of student self-assessment by interviewing sixteen academics in twelve different areas in New South Wales, Australia. The study identified three different notions of student self-assessment: ‘*teacher-driven self-assessment’*, ‘*programme-driven self-assessment’*, and ‘*future-driven self-assessment’*. From the findings, ‘*Teacher-driven self-assessment’* was restricted to what an individual academic preferred and expected, and thus standards for students judging their performance might be individualised and varied according to each academic. '*Programme-driven self-assessment'* referred to the assessment requirements of the programmes. However, as Tan argued, it was academics who passed on these requirements with their own interpretations; therefore, student self-assessment was mainly driven by academics. He pointed out that these two conceptions shared 'the limitation of self-assessment as an activity that perpetuates the existing mechanism of assessment…with existing assessment practices and assessment reliability' (p. 121). As such, Tan argued for '*future-driven self-assessment'* that 'looks beyond the notion of reliability within formal programmes of study to embrace a more critical and reflexive view of student assessment and self-assessment' (*ibid.*). This argument has strong implications for using self-assessment to develop students' criticality and reflexivity for LLL.

From these studies, it is clear that although students may recognise the value of self-assessment and be keen on using it, their ability to self-assess accurately seems to be low. They are confused about standards for self-assessment framed by teachers' own perceptions and interpretations. Also, how self-assessment should be used, how it should be improved, and how to integrate it into other assessment activities as well as the teaching and learning process in order to develop students' criticality and flexibility for LLL are issues that may need further research.

2.4.3 Peer assessment

According to Falchikov (2005), peer assessment refers to judging peers' work or performance against standards and criteria. Peer assessment, as Falchikov (2005), Cassidy (2006), and Vu and Dall' Alba (2007) maintain, is beneficial to students in that (i) it makes students more responsible and autonomous learners and helps develop their ability of judgement; (ii) through peer assessment, students can understand more about assessment standards and criteria for good and bad performance, and such understanding may help students improve their own performance; (iii) students seems to work harder when assessed by peers; and (iv) peer assessment may promote deep learning. These are significant not only for students present learning but also for LLL and especially for employability, as Cassidy (2006) posits, 'student peer assessment is one example of educational practice which is likely to contribute positively towards the development of employability skills' (p. 509). However, Vu and Dall'Alba (2007: 542) point out that peer assessment also has some limitations, such as more time and work for teachers and students; students may be 'unrealistic or biased' due to lack of assessment skills; and negative peer-feedback may be an ethical problem.

Among studies that explore perceptions of peer assessment and how peer assessment is applied in practice are those by Brew *et al.* (2009), Bloxham and West (2004), Cassidy (2006), Vu and Dall'Alba (2007), and Patton (2012). Brew *et al.*'s research (2009) investigated students and teaching staff's comparative perceptions of participative assessment, including both peer assessment and self- assessment, by conducting a survey of 213 pre-service primary teachers and their 30 teaching staff, as well as semi-structured interviews with seven teaching staff. It was found that staff preferred peer- and self-assessment much more than their students and used peer assessment more frequently than self-assessment. Time saving was also strongly associated with staff's preference and use of peer assessment. Also, they recommended that students should be better prepared for these forms of assessment through staff's exemplars and explanation about the reasons of using them.

In addition to staff's preference for peer assessment, research also focuses on how peer assessment is implemented and implications that emerge from the implementation. In Bloxham and West's (2004) research, 22 pairs of sports studies students were asked to mark and provide feedback on their peers' posters against criteria in order to get students involved in peer assessment. A group interview (six students) and two questionnaires were conducted. The results showed that the peer assessment activity highly benefited students: most students were engaged in and gained more confidence in the marking process, understand more about feedback and assessment criteria. They are also aware that the peer assessment process is beneficial to their learning.

Using questionnaire and an open discussion about peer assessment led by the researcher, Cassidy (2006) studied attitudes of second year undergraduates about assessing others and being assessed in an applied social psychology or health psychology module. The findings identified that students had a positive attitude about peer assessment, that peer assessment helped them to promote their learning and understand more about what tutors expected on their work. Interestingly, Cassidy pointed out that in contrast to the idea that students do not understand or use the assessment criteria or feedback comment, as identified in the assessment literatures, students in this study understood and used them to revise their work. However, students seemed to be anxious about their assessment ability and responsibility of assessing their peers.

Vu and Dall'Alba's (2007) case study looked at students' experience of peer assessment in a second year Communication and Personnel Relations Course at a university in Australia with mixed research methods – document analysis, questionnaire, observation, focus group, and interview with the course coordinator. They found that the processes of peer assessment helped students prepare for their professions. However, they argued that peer assessment needed to meet the following conditions in order to be successfully applied: (i) the implementation should be well-prepared, (ii) assessment, learning outcomes and goals of the course need to be aligned, (iii) teachers should be available to support students during the process; and (iv) there should be follow-up 'constructive' discussions led by teachers after peer assessment (p. 541).

Different from the above-mentioned research, Patton (2012) explored students' views and attitudes on peer assessment in terms of power, using three focus groups in undergraduate programmes of Criminal Justice, International Studies, and Social Work. The data was analysed with a mutidimensional conceptual framework of power: ‘sovereign, epistemological, disciplinary, and structural’ (p. 719). The findings showed that students were in favour of using peer assessment as formative feedback to improve their learning rather than simply as a summative marking task. However, students also regarded the peer assessment practice as a way to reduce lecturers’ marking time in the cost-reducing HE context, and this might disempower them as ‘consumers of education’ (p.729). Thus, for Patton, the broader HE context and student voice should be noticed in assessment design.

To sum up, these studies showed that peer assessment is beneficial to student learning and that students seemed to be engaged in peer assessment tasks and recognised its values in helping them to better understand assessment processes and criteria in order to foster their learning. However, for effective implementation, students need also to be helped to understand more about the purposes and benefits of peer assessment, as well as be well-prepared with exemplars and explanation about how to do the task.

From the above analysis of theoretical perspectives and empirical research on assessment, it is obvious that assessment for learning, especially good feedback, self-assessment, and peer assessment, plays an important role in enhancing student learning. Apart from these issues, a number of studies take a ‘socio-cultural’ approach of formative assessment that emphasises the significance of contexts in assessment and learning. For Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) and Ecclestone (2007), students should be considered as possessing ‘assessment careers’; that is, their prior assessment experience before entering universities has important impacts on their reaction to assessment in HE. Thus, they argue for using the concept of 'assessment careers' when looking at how different assessment systems influence and shape 'learners' identities and dispositions for learning' differently (Ecclestone and Pryor 2003: 471). Pryor and Crossouard (2008) suggest a 'socio-cultural' framework of formative assessment that encompasses the construction of learners' identities through negotiations of assessment criteria and quality and interactions between teachers and students and among students in different assessment activities, such as observation, questioning and feedback. The framework highlights considering these negotiations and interactions in terms of power and control and in a wider social context beyond the classroom, such as the programme of study, the school, and so on (Pryor and Crossouard 2008).

However, most research on formative assessment seems to focus more on assessment that supports learning while at university (Boud and Falchikov 2006, 2007). Consequently, research on assessment in HE that prepares students for LLL is still limited. Perhaps the most distinctive research is David Boud's conceptual framework of 'assessment for learning in the longer term' or 'sustainable assessment'. Different from the works that have been reviewed, 'sustainable assessment' emphasises another purpose of assessment: to prepare students for future learning in addition to assessment for certification and for learning at university (Boud 2010a, UTS Assessment Futures Project 2009). By linking HE assessment to LLL, Boud's framework implies a future-oriented discourse of assessment that can be useful for reviewing and reforming assessment at universities. Yet, there is currently little research that develops and applies the framework when looking at assessment policy, philosophy and practices, especially in different countries. For these reasons, Boud's framework is the central organising features of this thesis, and I will explain it in detail in the next chapter.

2. 5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored research literatures on assessment, highlighting a selection of relevant studies. Overall what emerged is a rationale for putting formative feedback at the centre of assessment, for aiming at supporting student learning by innovating feedback, for encouraging students' engagement in the assessment and feedback process, and for promoting dialogues between lecturers and students and among students about assessment and feedback issues. There are also concerns, though weaker, about the difficulties of implementing self-assessment and peer-assessment. There are limited studies on assessment for LLL, except Boud's works, which will be discussed in the next chapter in relation to the concepts of learning, graduate attributes, and LLL.

3 Chapter three: Developing a theoretical perspective on student learning and assessment

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the literatures on assessment with the focus on summative and formative assessment, feedback, peer assessment and self-assessment. It argued that assessment should support both learning in HE and LLL. This chapter will now provide the theoretical perspective on student learning in HE, graduate attributes, and LLL viewed from different perspectives with an emphasis on an expansive version of LLL. It will then outline the conceptual framework of my study drawing on Boud's framework of sustainable assessment. I will show that Boud's approach supports a humanistic model of LLL instead of a human capital model and hence assessment that not only supports immediate learning but also expansive rather than reductive LLL.

3.2 Student learning in HE: purposes and different perspectives on learning

Expansive, humanistic learning in the contemporary context is captured in the Delors report 'Learning: the Treasure within' at the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century chaired by Jacques Delors, President of the European Commisssion, in 1996. According to the report, there are 'four pillars of learning': 'learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be', as explained by Delors:

> (L)earning to know, that is acquiring the instruments of understanding; learning to do, as to be able to act creatively on one's environment; learning to live together, so as to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities; and learning to be, an essential progression which proceeds from the previous three.
>
> (1996: 86)

These pillars of learning are also found in Ranson's learning theory (1998, in Walker 2006). Ranson considers learning as a 'multilayered' concept: the first layer is 'developing understanding of discrete events or pieces of knowledge'; the second: 'becoming aware of ourselves as persons'; and the more important third layer: understanding 'our growing capacity to shape, by ourselves and with others, the world around us' (1998: 18). Ranson's first learning layer is similar to the first pillar in the Delors report – *learning to know*. *Knowing*, for Ranson, is not only about acquiring knowledge about what we do not know, but also about changing our thinking about what we have already known. Ranson suggests that: 'learning is a process of discovery that generates new understandings about ourselves and the world around us' (p. 18). That is, in the process of discovering, shaping and deepening our understanding of things we have not known, through our learning experience, we can simultaneously change our conception of what we have already known about self, others, and the world. 'New understandings' are formed, and thus this process helps us to develop ourselves intellectually.

Ranson's second layer – 'becoming aware of ourselves as persons' resonates with *learning to be* or *being*. However, *being* in the Delors report emphasises personality development and the capability of acting with 'greater autonomy, judgement and personal responsibility' as well as an individual's 'memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical capacities and communication skills' (1996: 37). Here, more emphasis is put on reasoning development and thus, emotional development seems to be neglected. Differently, Ranson argues that *being* includes both learners' emotional and reasoning development. Similarly, for Walker (2006: 69), emotion and reason are closely linked, and thus emotions should be educated in HE so that students can learn to become emotionally mature and build up a capability for 'ethical reasoning'. This capability is important to students when ethically judging problems that happen in real life, as Nussbaum (2001: 1, in Walker 2006: 69) posits: 'if emotions are suffused with intelligence and discernment, and if they contain in themselves an awareness of value or importance, they cannot, for example, easily be sidelined in accounts of ethical judgement.'

Resonating with the pillar in the Delors report – *learning to act* – is Ranson's third layer. Learning is through action and experience gained from acting. This brings about learners' 'capability for *self-creation*' and helps build up 'our distinctive agency as human beings' (Ranson 1998: 19). Thus, Ranson's third layer is about 'the role of agency in learning' (quoted in Walker 2006: 70). Walker argues therefore that the main goal of learning is to construct human capabilities through our acquired knowledge and skills. As Walker points out, in Ranson's third layer, learning is a lifelong process and 'deeply social' because we develop ourselves with and through interaction with others. This resonates with another pillar of learning – *learning to live together*. These above-mentioned facets of learning are also the key features of a capability approach (Walker 2006) to student learning, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Given the four purposes of learning in the Delors report and Ranson's theory about multi-layers of learning in the learning society and the earlier analysis of economic, social and cultural aims of HE, a number of authors argue from a sociological perspective for putting the student's learning experience in a broader social, cultural and political context, for human values, social justice, and for intellectual as well as ethical attributes or capabilities. Mann's (2001) work on student alienation and engagement is a good example of this perspective. For Mann, HE should aim at 'the development of critical being – for personal engagement, inclusion, and LLL' (2001:7). In order to achieve these aims, she suggests that students' learning approaches should be reframed into students' learning experiences of alienation and engagement as she argues that higher education can bring about 'an engaging and positive effect' or 'a negative and alienating effect' (2008: 13). Alienation is 'the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved' (Mann 2001: 8). In examining seven theoretical perspectives on students' experiences of alienation, Mann argues for attention to multiple factors in teaching and learning, including 'the student's capacity for creative engagement', 'the student's self', the complex, uncertain and threatening process of learning, and 'the complex relations of power that exist within the educational and teaching/learning processes' (p. 17). Similarly, McCulloch (2009) and Taylor and Wilding (2009) also argue for student engagement. For them, the student's role as producer of learning and collaborator in the teaching and learning process should be re-emphasised instead of 'the student as consumer' in the commodification of HE, the dominant perspective analysed earlier.

If the goals of HE include not only national and individual economic prosperity but also personal fulfilment, ethical and justice values, as well as fostering LLL, what attributes should HE provide to its graduates? The next section will attempt to answer this question.

3.3 Graduate attributes in relation to LLL

Graduate attributes have been defined by the Australian Technology Network (ATN) as

> The qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include, but go beyond, the disciplinary expertise to technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are the qualities that also prepare graduates as agents for social good in an unknown future.
>
> (Boud and Solomon 2006: 212)

Graduate attributes include two main types: professional attributes and generic attributes. Professional attributes refer to 'technical and technological knowledge' or 'disciplinary-based attributes', that is, the capability to understand, apply, and develop theories in the subject disciplines, which are essential for graduates to learn about and practise their professions (Winch 2006).Generic attributes or '*transferable* knowledge and skills' are 'the collection of skills, capacities, dispositions, and values that together represent the more general outcomes of learning' (Holland 2006: 267). The most common generic graduate attributes include: communication skills; searching and organising information; criticality; creativity; problem-solving skills, team-working capability; research skills, IT skills, and so on (Winch 2006). From a work-based perspective, graduate attributes are divided into three types: ‘professional attributes’ (as defined above), ‘learning to learn attributes’ – for continuous learning, aiming at professional and personal development; and ‘personal attributes’ – acting and being responsible as ‘a professional and a citizen’ (Boud and Solomon 2006: 213). As university graduates will take up professional work of varying kinds, both forms are important. From these definitions and distinctions, graduate attributes are not only for employability but also for effective participation in the society.

However, for policy makers, graduate attributes focus more on meeting the needs of the knowledge economy and maintaining competitive advantage globally and thus neglect ‘social inclusion’ and LLL opportunities (Bathmaker and Appleby 2006). Graduate attributes should function, Walker argues, as ‘a way to create change, to make futures and to strengthen agency’ (2007: 145). Therefore, which attributes should HE provide for its graduates? A number of authors argue for graduate attributes which focus on richer *human development*, *well-being*, *social justice*, and *LLL*. Among them are Barnett’s graduate attributes in ‘the age of supercomplexity’ (2006), McLean’s on critical pedagogy (2006), and Walker’s on the capability approach (2006).

For Barnett (2006), we are living in an ever-changing world conceptualised by him as ‘an age of supercomplexity’ in which there are ‘multiple and conflicting interpretations' of a situation. Such an uncertain, unpredictable, and constantly changing world causes 'superstructural changes' – changes in human being and 'substantive changes', that is 'new knowledges, new adaptations, and new skills' (p. 50). He argues that 'superstructural changes' are much more significant than 'substantial changes' because changes in human being brings about the acquisition of 'new knowledges and new skills'. Thus, Barnett asserts that it is *being*, not knowledge or skills, that becomes the key educational challenge and should be the centre of HE. He further argues that HE is a stage of LLL; therefore, it has to furnish students with attributes of *being* in order to enable them to successfully live in an uncertain, unpredictable and contested world and to prepare them for LLL. Accordingly, HE graduates have to possess (i) 'authentic being' – having independent and genuine thoughts and actions and being able to justify them; (ii) 'individuality' – be able to identify and express their individuality in a constantly changing context; and (iii) 'human disposition and qualities' (p. 57– 61). Qualities should comprise of 'courage, resilience, fortitude and quietness', and dispositions refers to being self-changed, engaged with the world, inquisitive, and willing to communicate (p.61). Barnett calls for HE to put the development of the self at the centre: fostering students with these human capabilities to enable them effectively cope with changes, uncertainty and challenges in a world of 'supercomplexity' and prepare them for LLL.

McLean (2006) also focuses on developing being or the *self*, but unlike Barnett who focuses on developing and renewing the self to cope with a constantly changing and super-complex world, McLean uses Jurgen

Habermas's critical theory as a framework which views the *self* in relation to *culture* (others), and *society* as she believes this theory addresses 'the intellectual, moral, and practical problems' and provides 'an optimistic view of human development' (McLean 2006: 10). She applies Habermas's 'theory of the colonisation of the lifeworld' to explain the distortion of teaching and learning by money and power, his 'theory of communicative action' to suggest goals for university education in the present society, and his concept of 'communicative reason' to propose students' attributes that a university education should focus on (p. 4). This is also McLean's definition of critical pedagogy. For her, critical pedagogy in universities means 'teaching and learning focused on developing students' intellectual and moral attributes (communicative reason) so that they are disposed to think creatively and act responsibly with others to ameliorate the problems of contemporary society' (p. 128). These attributes include: becoming 'analytic, critical and imaginative thinkers', self-aware, self- determined, and co-operative with others for the public good. Here, not only the intellectual but the social aspects are also taken into consideration.

Aligned theoretically with Barnett and McLean, Walker (2006, 2008) argues for human capabilities to be cultivated; however, she puts more emphasis on an ethical and social justice discourse. Using the capability approach combining both Sen's and Nussbaum's perspectives, Walker argues for human development through people's freedom of choice and opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value. For her, the capability approach is not an educational theory but with its two key features – 'agency freedom' and ‘agency achievement’, it is an approach to ‘human development and quality of life, especially poverty reduction’ (2006: 31), including education. Capability is defined by Sen as ‘what people are actually free to be and do, rather than how much income they have’ (1993, in Walker and Unterhalter 2007: 2). That is, people should have freedom to choose what to do and how to live their own valuable lives including but not limited to work and income opportunities. As Nussbaum (2000: 58, in Walker 2008: 477) puts it, a person is ‘source of agency and worth in their own right, with their own plans to make and their own lives to live’. The concept of capability is different from functioning: a capability is a ‘potential functioning’, whereas a functioning refers to people’s actual achievement (Walker 2008: 478). Walker maintains that the distinction of capability and functioning is significant because the same outcomes or functioning can be achieved by people with different opportunities and choices of freedom. Functionings would be broadly similar to learning outcomes and even to graduate attributes although the language of capabilities is richer and includes plural goals, not only human capital.

Education, in Sen’s perspective, therefore possesses an ‘*instrumental* role’ and ‘*intrinsic* value’. His capability approach goes ‘*beyond* human capital’ and is directly related to ‘the well-being and freedom of people’ (Sen 2003: 37). Similar to human capital approaches, education from Sen’s view does have an ‘*instrumental* role’ in that it is an instrument for a person to do valuable things (for example: widening their understanding of the world (Walker 2006: 31). Nevertheless, unlike human capital approaches which consider employability as the benefit that education brings about, as Walker argues, education in Sen's capability approach has '*intrinsic* value' in that 'being educated is a valuable achievement in itself, for its own sake even if there is no economic benefit' (2008: 479). Thus, Walker posits that education is a fundamental capability to develop and expand other capabilities in that having education brings about more human freedom; in contrast, not having good quality education hinders human development (2006: 31). In addition to its *instrumental* and *intrinsic* value, Walker, following Sen, argues education has 'empowerment and distributive effects': it helps disadvantaged or excluded groups improve their ability to fight against and reduce inequalities, especially gender inequality; thus it is 'an unqualified good' for the development of human capability, freedom, and plural graduate functionings (Walker 2006, 2008).

Walker also draws on Nussbaum's (1997) perspective on 'the cultivation of humanity' because it is practically helpful (2008: 479). For Nussbaum (1997), humanity is cultivated by three key capabilities, 'critical self-examination', 'narrative imagination' and 'world citizenship', and in Nussbaum (2000) two important capabilities for LLL: 'practical reason' – 'being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about planning one's life' and 'affiliation' – 'social relations, equal recognition, and valuing' – are regarded as 'architectonic' and significant to education (Nussbaum 2000: 79, in Walker 2008: 479).

However, Walker (2008: 477–478) argues that Sen and Nussbaum do not establish a connection between the capability approach and the processes and outcomes of education, which is what Walker attempts to do in her argument in order to explore the practicability of the capability approach in HE contexts. She bridges Sen's two concepts – capability and functioning – to form the term 'functional capabilities' and establishes a working, revisable list of 'functional capabilities', including '*knowledge, social relations, critical thinking, imagination and empathy, recognition and respect, active and experiential learning, autonomy, confidence, active citizenship, deliberative dialogues,* and *having economic opportunities'* (Walker 2006, 2008). The capabilities in this list capture Nussbaum's key capabilities – '*critical thinking, world citizenship, and imaginative understanding'*, as mentioned above. They have significant implications for the teaching and learning in HE because, Walker argues, they ought to be what HE aims at equipping its learners.

A capabilities-based list pulls together significant attributes, such as self-formation, people's freedom of choice and opportunities, and so on, aiming at developing a graduate's well-being in line with the well-being of others and society. Moreover, the capabilities in the list resonate with the ideas of a substantial body of work which from the sociological perspective argues that the goals of HE are not only for national economic prosperity but also for people's well-being and social justice, and that they should prepare graduates for living their whole lives as individuals, workers and citizens. This brings me to considering LLL and its relevance to the goals of HE. In the next section I will explore why LLL is important and how it is viewed from different perspectives.

3.4 LLL viewed from different perspectives

For Field (2006), the concept of LLL originated early in the West with Yeaxlee talking about 'education as a lifelong process' (Yeaxlee 1920: 25, in Field 2006: 13), and was made popular by UNESCO during the 1960s and 1970s with a significant 1972 UNESCO publication *Learning to be* – a report on the principles of LLL led by Edgar Faure. Simultaneously, the OECD (1973, in Field 2006: 14) raised the concept of 'recurrent education' to back up economic development and upgrade or update skills of the workforce. The concept of LLL and the learning society emerged again from changes in Western economies due to the growth of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and in the new trend of socio-economic policies in the 1990s (Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007). In the European Commission White Paper *Towards the Learning Society* in 1995, LLL was considered as a strategy, which is 'a turning point' in developing the discourse of LLL and the learning society because it poses the key challenges of the effects of globalisation and the knowledge and raises two major solutions: focusing on 'a broad base of knowledge' and forming employable capacity for the knowledge economy (Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007: 3). Thus, globalisation and the knowledge economy are perceived to be the main impetus in developing LLL (Hinchliffe 2006). Therefore, LLL has currently been a major issue in policy planning of many countries and international organisations. According to Rizvi and Lingard (2006: 253), one mission of the OECD's Directorate of Education stated on its website is 'to assist members and partners in achieving high quality LLL for all' and developing LLL became one of the six objectives in its strategic plan for 2005-2006.

LLL could be broadly defined as *'structured, purposeful learning throughout the lifespan, from cradle to grave*' (Maclachlan and Osborne 2009: 575). It includes both lifelong and lifewide, involving continuous formal and informal learning (including working and entertaining activities), in formal and informal contexts (e.g. home, workplace, colleges, universities, and so on), and throughout people's lives (Aspin and Chapman 2007; Schuetze and Casey 2006). However, LLL is a contested concept which can be expansive or reductive. For human capital approaches, it is more narrowly understood. For Barnett and others, LLL is more expansively understood.

3.4.1 The human capital approaches of LLL

The human capital approaches of LLL used by policy-makers, politicians, and international organisations aim at economic and social inclusion and are guided by neoliberalism, especially human capital theory. These approaches tend to be instrumental in considering LLL as a means to achieve personal interests and promote employability, local and national economic competitiveness to meet the demands of the knowledge economy and globalisation (Edwards *et al*. 2002; Field 2006; Rogers 2006; Walker 2012). LLL is defined by the European Commission as:

> (a)ll learning activity undertaken throughout the life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspectives.
>
> (EC 2001, in Schuetze and Casey 2006: 294)

To maintain employability and cope with economic and social changes, people are obliged to up-skill and re-skill through whole-life education and training. Thus, taking part in LLL may not be people's own choice and will, but an obligation or a must for them (Coffield 2002; Crowther 2004; Field 2006). Also, people must be responsible for their own skill development, which means that learning (and also financial) responsibility is shifted from the state to the individual (Crowther 2004; Field 2006; Olssen 2006). For Jarvis (2009a: 272), this definition is more appropriate for adult learning rather than LLL and fails to link education and training and HE with LLL. Also, as Jarvis points out, employability is the last in the definition, yet seems to be the priority in most policy documents by the European Commission and European Union (EU). Similarly, the World Bank (2003) strongly asserts that LLL is 'education for the knowledge economy' (p.xiii) and is important to training workers for competitions in the global economy. Thus, in LLL policies and practices, employability becomes the most important goal, and this reduces LLL to 'work-life learning' instead of 'life-span learning' (Jarvis 2009a: 273–274).

About social inclusion, the human capital approaches maintain that LLL provides all individuals, including the excluded groups with full participation in the community or society (Rogers 2006; Preece 2006; Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007). However, it is argued that such social inclusion is framed instrumentally and reductively by 'economic productivity': exclusion means being unable to integrate into the global economy, and thus the discourse 'is motivated more by a political agenda of social control than with issues of social transformation through education' (Rizvi 2007: 127). Therefore, Walker (2012) argues that these approaches are reductive because they narrow down the concept of LLL to learning for personal interests, economic growth, and social control with fewer opportunities for the development of 'well-being' and 'social justice'.

3.4.2 The expansive approaches of LLL

Although recognising that this economic trend is unavoidable, researchers (e.g. Edwards *et al*. 2002; Aspin and Chapman 2007; Barnett 2006; Rizvi 2007; Walker 2012) call for an expansive version of LLL. This version differs from the human capital approaches in that it includes not only *economic* but also *human* and *social* development and emphasises the needs to preserve the latter two in the earlier approaches of LLL together with new conceptualisations that have recently emerged (Field 2006; Rizvi 2007; Walker 2012). Aspin and Chapman argue for the 'triadic nature of LLL' with three dimensions: economic growth, personal improvement and accomplishment, and 'social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity' (2007: 34). Rizvi calls for a new discourse of LLL

> which is not trapped within the neo-liberal imaginary, and which does not become a mechanism for exclusion and control, which does not shift the responsibility for learning from the state to the individual, and places emphasis instead on collective, critical, and reflective learning as well as learning from experience.
>
> (2007:129)

Edwards *et al.* (2002) suggest a LLL theory that emphasises developing 'reflexivity' which enables people to manage and direct their own lives, improve their capabilities, and actively interact with uncertain or dislocated contexts. Barnett (2006) emphasises development of the '*self*' or '*being*' that comprises of 'authenticity', 'individuality', and 'human disposition and qualities' in constructing lifelong learners. He argues that LLL is 'a matter of continually engaging in forming a sense of oneself in the world' (*ibid.*: 63). However, the self and the world are reciprocally and interactively related, and the world is constantly changing, as such, the self may continually be remade and rediscovered (*ibid.*)

Walker (2012) suggests 'a human capabilities model' of lifelong education that focuses on social equality and justice. This model combines Sen's and Nussbaum's views on capabilities and education. It includes human capital, but focuses on 'being human' with 'full human flourishing and dignity to choose a good life', and 'well-being', and 'agency' (*ibid.*: 188). 'Well-being' refers to actual chances for a person to do and be what and who they want and 'agency' means following and recognising their own goals (more about the capability approach was analysed earlier) (*ibid.*). Accordingly, people should have freedom to make their own choice about education based on their own will without being obliged or used as a means by others and be provided with equal opportunities to do so (*ibid.*). This is opposed to the human capital approaches that consider LLL as obligations and means for economic growth. Unlike the human capital approaches evaluating equality by income, this model uses 'well-being' and 'agency' (*ibid*). On this basis, Walker suggests three features of the model, including: (i) a framework to evaluate lifelong education, using 'well-being' and 'agency' instead of income; (ii) people having equal opportunities to construct 'an education capability'; and (iii) the development of ‘obligations to other’ – acting with regards for others as responsible members living collaboratively with others in communities (*ibid.*: 192). She argues that the human capabilities model is ‘the richest model and one most appropriate to an expansive understanding and practice of lifelong education’ (*ibid*.:188).

To sum up, this section has highlighted a broader and more expansive view of HE, graduate attributes, and LLL that centres around the ‘four pillars of learning’ – *learning to know, learning to do, learning to be*, and *learning to live together*. Such expansive view differs from the reductive human capital approaches in that, in addition to economic and personal development, it emphasises intrinsic learning and the formation of key human capabilities and functionings for students to fully have a richer human life and prepare for LLL. These include not only developing critical, independent, creative, and reflexive lifelong learners, but also citizens who are cooperative and responsible for others in the community and contribute to social development. These underpin and strengthen the conceptual framework of my study, and add depth to the sustainable assessment framework outlined in the following section.

3.5 Conceptual framework

Boud defines sustainable assessment as ‘assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future needs’ (Boud 2000: 151). That is, it aims at not only providing certification (summative assessment) and improving the students’ present learning (formative assessment) but also preparing them for rich future learning (Boud 2007, 2009). In this way, sustainable assessment can be aligned with human development. Boud and Falchikov maintain that 'sustainable assessment is not a new type of assessment practice, but a way of building on summative and formative assessment to foster longer-term goals' (2006:405). The framework of sustainable assessment is generated and developed in Boud (2000, 2007, 2009 a, b, 2010a, b, c), Boud and Falchikov (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008), and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Assessment Futures Project (2009). This section will explore Boud's own view about LLL and assessment and the main features of his sustainable assessment framework.

3.5.1 Boud's view on LLL and assessment

Boud developed the framework with the key proposition that one of the main purposes that HE assessment should aim at is to prepare students for LLL in order to establish a learning society (Boud 2000). However, among different views on the concept of the learning society, Boud supports Edwards's idea on transferring from 'an educated society' or 'a learning market' into 'learning networks' where learners actively participate and use 'a learning approach to life' for practising different learning activities (Edwards 1997, in Boud 2000:153). Boud also highlights Barnett's (1999) argument for preparing students to face the age of 'supercomplexity' and 'the need for work to become learning and learning to become work', as well as Bowden and Marton's (1998) idea about equipping students with criticality to deal with unknown situations(*ibid.*:153). On this basis, he presents his own perspective on how to prepare students for a learning society that 'learners today will continue to be learners throughout their lives more than ever before: in work, in families, and in communities' (*ibid.*: 153). In other words, for Boud, HE students should be supported to develop capacities for LLL so that they can function well in multiple aspects of their future lives.

While capacities of university students were described by Cardinal Newman in 1853 in terms of 'cognitive, communication, and interpersonal skills and "certain affective qualities"' and most of them could still be seen in the description of skills for LLL in the 1997 Dearing Report, the present approach to LLL by policy makers tend to focus more on developing generic skills for employability prescribed in the programme learning outcomes and perceived to be in line with assessment (Boud and Fachikov 2008: 87–88). Such emphasis may cause some problems, and the first is those with LLL skills lists. Boud and Falchikov (2008) point out the ideas of Carr and Claxton (2002) and Knight and York (2003) about the variety of these lists due to influences of cultural and national values and compilers' own perspectives, as well as their over-idealisation, decontextualisation, and separation from realities or actual use of businesses. As they maintain, those problems may cause difficulties in choosing and shaping assessment to assess the listed skills. Secondly, for them, the demonstration of how generic skills are transferred from one context to the others is still insufficient. They use Bouden and Marton's (1998) explanation that the reason is due to a lack of contextualisation in teaching and learning, which consequently makes learning and assessment become shallow. Thus, Boud and Falchikov emphasise that learning should take place in different contexts. Thirdly, as they point out, there are various viewpoints on formal and informal learning, and regularly learning in HE seems to be considered as formal learning, separated from LLL. Therefore, they argue that learning in HE should connect with and support LLL and that assessment needs to develop students' capacity to self-assess and direct their learning in order to become LLL learners. In other words, assessment should become an important part of LLL (Boud 2000). However, do the contemporary assessment practices fulfil this role?

As discussed in Chapter 2, assessment is often perceived to include two main purposes: for certification (summative assessment) and for learning (formative assessment). However, according to Boud (2007), the dominant assessment discourse viewed by policy makers which primarily focuses on the summative purpose – certifying student achievement, measuring learning outcomes, and ensuring quality and standards – has the consequences of undermining the formative purpose of supporting student learning; and making assessment appear for the advantages of others rather than students (Falchikov and Boud 2008). Furthermore, summative discourse tends to construct students as 'passive subjects' complying with 'assessment bureaucracy'– assessment regulations and the process of measurement and classification – and this goes against supporting students to become 'active learners' who can make their own decisions and dynamically engage in learning and assessment (Boud 2007: 17). Boud (2010b) also maintains that with the present assessment practices, students seem to depend on teachers, playing a passive role of ‘being assessed’ and receivers of information and feedback. In addition, feedback in assessment policy documents tends to be treated as the only factor that affects learning, which may hinder ‘the development of a more sophisticated assessment discourse’ (Boud 2007: 18). As he explains, feedback seems to be ‘a passive act’ acquired by students from teachers, and it is only effective when there is evidence that students’ work is improved thanks to feedback; yet in reality it is difficult to find out such evidence or feedback is often given too late for students to adjust their work (2007: 18). For Boud, attention should be paid to not only feedback but other aspects of learning and assessment and learning must be the core of any assessment innovation. Essentially, formative assessment, according to Boud and Falchikov (2005: 35), highlights ‘immediate outcomes’ or ‘immediate learning concerns’ of a course or a programme and consequently may not pay enough attention to equipping students with capacities for future learning.

In identifying problems of LLL and assessment dominant perspectives, Boud remarks that the present assessment discourse and practices seem to be insufficient to prepare students for future changes, complexities, and lifelong learning. Thus, he argues for a reconceptualisation of assessment towards ‘sustainable assessment’ or ‘assessment for learning in the longer term’.

3.5.2 The framework of sustainable assessment

The framework of sustainable assessment includes four main conceptual features – *(i) being sustainable, (ii) developing informed judgement, (iii)* *constructing reflexive learners*, and *(iv)forming the becoming practitioner*. These are the theoretical base and principles of sustainable assessment. In addition to these features, the framework also is comprised of eight key elements for practice – *(i) engaging students, (ii) integrative activities, (iii) authentic activities, (iv) students designing assessment, (v) learning and judgement, (vi) modelling and practices, (vii) working with peer*s, and *(viii) giving and receiving feedback* (Boud and Falchikov 2007; Boud 2009a,b, 2010a; UTS Assessment Future Project 2009). They are put together into a diagram that I designed (see Figure 3.1).

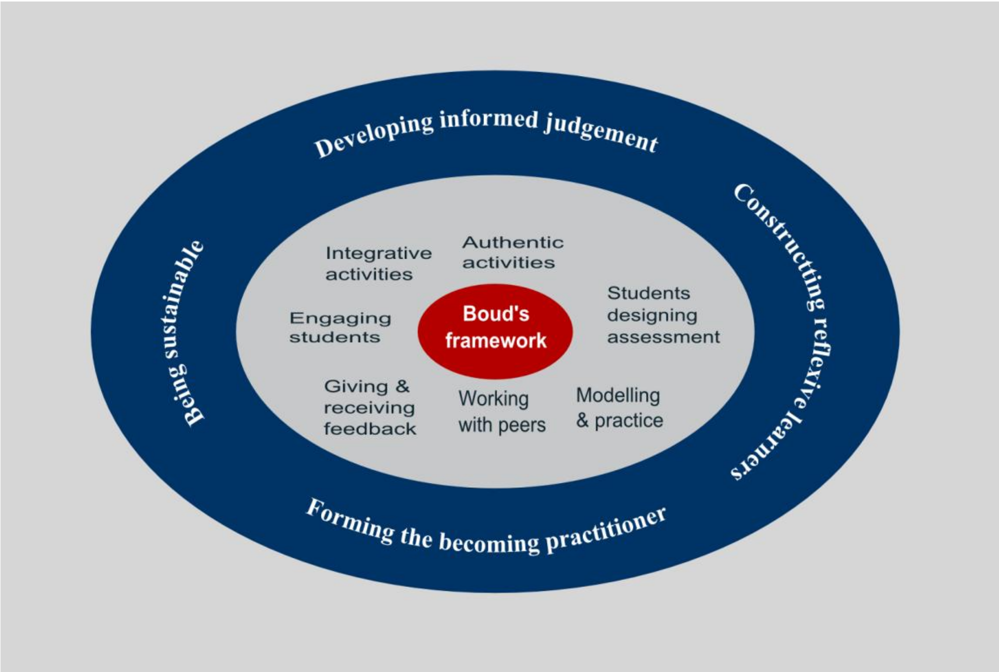

Figure 3.1 My diagram of Boud's framework of sustainable assessment

- <u>Four main conceptual features of Boud's sustainable assessment framework</u>

(i) Being sustainable

Assessment is sustainable when it responds to not only university learning requirements and outcomes but also to what is needed for future learning and work and highlights developing contextualised higher–order knowledge and skills (Boud 2010a). To prepare students for the future, for Boud (2010 a), assessment tasks should not assess students' ability to memorise facts, which may promote rote learning. Instead, they should get students engaged in critically analysing and solving challenging problems (Boud and Falchikov 2005, 2006). However, according to Boud and Falchikov (2006, 2008), there seems to be lack of connection between HE assessment and the world of work; thus they argue for providing students with opportunities to apply different work contexts in learning and assessment activities. In order to do so, assessment tasks need to be authentic, that is, they must be linked to real work and life situations (Boud and Falchikov 2006, 2007). Nevertheless, when contextualisation and authenticity of assessment are considered as important, assessment may not necessarily take place in real working contexts but can be their simulations or models (UTS Assessment Future Project 2009).

Moreover, assessment is sustainable when it prevents students from depending on others, especially lecturers (Boud 2010a). As stated in the 'Assessment 2020', one of the conditions for most effective assessment is that students and lecturers should be ‘partners’ in learning and assessment (UTS Assessment Future Project 2009). In addition to being sustainable, developing ‘informed judgement’ is the core of Boud’s framework that the next section will explore.

(ii) Developing informed judgement

For Boud (2009a), judgement is a daily activity that people make at work and in life about where they are, the effectiveness of what they have done, and what they should do in future, either individually or collectively; thus students need to form the capacity for making ‘informed judgement’. ‘Informing judgement’ is to inform the ability of judging an issue based on evidence and situations, thoroughly concluding and acting upon this judgement (Boud 2007). It implies direct connections between assessment and learning and puts learning at the core – ‘learning to form judgement’, ‘forming judgement about learning’, and ‘informing judgement for future decision-making about learning’ (Boud 2007: 19). In other words, ‘informing judgement’ emphasises informing students about not only others’ judgement on their learning but also their own judgement to be eligible for certifications, but more importantly, to improve their present and future learning (Boud 2007, 2009a). ‘Informed judgement’ does not simply refer to one-way assessment from teachers to students. It is a multi-dimensional concept, combining assessment by teachers, peer assessment, and self-assessment, connecting summative and formative assessment to LLL, and putting developing students’ self-assessment capacity at the centre.

Boud and Falchikov (2007: 186–190) suggest a model to build up 'informed judgement' with five non-linear and interrelated elements, summarised as follows:

1. *Identifying self as an active learner:* Learners should be supported to position themselves primarily as learners and especially as 'active learners' through different authentic learning and assessment activities that promote their full engagement and participation from the design stage to the end.
2. *Identifying own level of knowledge and the gaps in this; finding ways of moving from what is known to what it is desirable to know:* Learners should be helped to recognise what they know and do not know, what knowledge and skills they still need to develop, what their goals are, and what they should do to attain them. Teachers need to be aware of learners' knowledge level and their ability of making judgement in order to use appropriate teaching strategies to better support them in this process.
3. *Practicing testing and judging:* Instead of being passively assessed and receiving feedback from lecturers, students should be supported to assess their own work, apply assessment criteria and standards, and use their understanding, knowledge, and skills they have accumulated in the courses. This ability can be built up through suitable self-assessment tasks, feedback from multiple sources, and peer assessment.
4. *Developing judgement skills over time:* Assessment tasks must

help students learn to ‘take the initiative’, ‘consider risk’ and become confident on assessing their own learning (p. 189), and this needs to be highlighted and accommodated into the curriculum, as well as teaching, learning, and assessment activities in all stages of the entire programme.

5. ‘*Embodying reflexivity and commitment*: Learners need to become conscious and reflexive about their learning at the beginning of the judgement process, and this is continuously renewed and built up. Reflexivity and constructing reflexive learners will be further discussed in the next section.

(iii) Constructing reflexive learners

For Boud (2007), assessment should form reflexive, self-regulated learners. He explains that reflexivity originates from social theory and self-regulation from psychology but both refer to learners’ ability to reflect and direct their performance, view their learning in context, and consciously meet the demands of the tasks. Reflexivity and self-regulation are more than skills; they are ‘dispositions and an orientation to both work and learning’ (Boud 2007: 22) that must be ‘embodied in the person of the learner’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007: 190). They are fundamental factors in forming confident and active learners who are ‘pro-active’, ‘generative’, and responsible for their learning (Boud 2010a, b). Accordingly, learners must dynamically get engaged in assessment, such as participating in the formation of criteria and standards, giving critical feedback on their peers’ works, and assessing their own work (Boud 2010 a). However, Boud (2007, 2010a) notices that improving reflexivity and self-regulation may not work if we just focus on assessment, for example, inserting self-assessment and peer assessment tasks into the course or giving feedback, but this needs to be emphasised in all activities throughout the whole programme.

(iv) Forming the becoming practitioner

Assessment is the key element to constructing 'the becoming practitioner' (Boud 2010a). Boud mentions Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (2005) stages of becoming 'an experienced practitioner': 'novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, expertise, mastery, and practical wisdom' in which the latter, especially 'practical wisdom', are more essential to learning (2010b: 30). He supports Dreyfus's opinion that 'practical wisdom' goes beyond 'expertise' and 'mastery', develops the way students' view themselves, other people, and things around them, and enables further learning – 'the general ability to do the appropriate thing, at the appropriate time, and in the appropriate way' (Dreyfus 2001: 48, in Boud 2007: 190). He also backs up Dreyfus's argument for putting 'embodiment' at the core of forming practitioners and expands the characteristics of reflective practice to include: *contextualisation* – considering the significance of contexts in which practice takes place; *transdisciplinarity* – recognising that practitioners coming from different backgrounds, specialisations or cultures work in groups or teams to solve a problem collectively rather than individually, which requires them to see it in another person's view rather than their own;

embodiment – involving practitioners' engaging emotion, will, and commitment in practice, *coproduction* – emphasising 'co-productive relationships' of practitioners and colleagues in terms of knowledge, skills, and power (2010b: 33–35). For Boud (2009a, 2010b), this helps move the focus of practice from individualistic to collective.

Boud (2010a) remarks that constructing practitioners in learning and assessment requires all the above-mentioned features of learners – reflexive, responsible for, and confident and able to develop skills to make 'informed judgement' about their own learning. It also encourages learners to be active by initiating and owning the assessment process instead of playing a passive role (*ibid.*). However, as Boud argues, from the collective viewpoint of practice, students should not work in isolation but together with peers to form capacity for judgement and engage in 'communities of judgement' with other people involved, both academically and professionally (*ibid.*).He also emphasises the necessity for assessment to support students compare their judgement with standards and the judgement of others, which he calls 'calibrate judgement'. He maintains that:

> Learners will act on the basic of their belief in their own judgement. If these are flawed, it is much more serious than having particular knowledge gaps. Assessment activities must therefore allow students to make calibrations of their judgements in comparison with others....The use of yardsticks is not a return to discredited forms of norm-based assessment; it ensures that students can have judgement of their own work tested alongside the judgement of others according to practice standards.
>
> (*ibid.*: 257)

These four main features, as explored above, provide theoretical and conceptual grounds for Boud's sustainable assessment framework. Embedded into these conceptual features are eight key elements for practice which will be briefly introduced in the following section.

- Key assessment elements of Boud's framework of sustainable assessment

Boud (2010a) and UTS Assessment Future Project (2009) introduce eight key assessment elements to guide assessment practices, summarised as follows:

(i) *Actively engaging students in learning tasks*: Students need to get engage early and continuously in the assessment process as active learners through class participation, judgement of samples of other students' work, identification and development of assessment standards and criteria.

(ii) *'Authentic' and investigative activities:* Students are required to deal with real-life problems as professional practitioners. Some examples of authentic tasks can be: authentic presentation, research projects or investigations, and negotiation with lecturers on an assessment tasks.

(iii) *Students designing assessments:* This refers to students' creation and justification of assessment activities, including: taking part in designing assessment tasks, creating assessment rubrics, and negotiating with their lecturers about their learning programme and assessment.

(iv) *Integrative tasks:* Students are enabled to holistically look at their learning through various tasks connecting with each other in a unit, module and across modules, courses, and the whole programme.

For example: staged assignments, learning portfolios or journals, assessment tasks connected to key skills or learning outcomes.

(v) *Becoming aware of learning and judgement:* Students can develop reflexivity and self-regulation through choosing appropriate learning tasks, doing self-tests and using results to adjust and improve learning, as well as reflecting what they know and do not know.

(vi) *Modelling and practice:* This involves providing students with sampled answers and works, as well as chances for them to solve problems in their learning materials or to use feedback to upgrade their work.

(vii) *Working with peers:* Students can form the ability to work collaboratively with others through peer coaching (pair or group work), group assessment, team or group work on problem solving.

(viii) *Giving and receiving feedback:* This is considered as central to assessment that supports learning and can take the form of assessors' feedback, peer feedback, and students' 'calibration of judgement'. However, Boud (2010a) notices that feedback is only effective when the 'feedback loop' is complete; that is, there is evidence that feedback helps improve students' work.

With its four main conceptual features and eight key elements, Boud's framework of sustainable assessment tends to go beyond the 'constructive alignment' (Biggs 2007) of teaching, learning, assessment, and learning outcomes, to promote learning which is 'socially constructed, participative, embedded, and necessarily contextualised' (Boud and Falchikov 2007: 190) and align HE learning and assessment with LLL (Boud 2010a). The framework encourages the development of key graduate attributes and captures the main features of the expansive version of LLL that have been analysed in the previous sections of this chapter. However, Boud and Falchikov (2008: 92–96) also identify some problems that may hinder the application of sustainable assessment. First, problems originate from the assessment regime that emphasises summative rather than formative assessment to be easier for grading and quality assurance, insufficiently conceptualised LLL outcomes, the curriculum and assessment practices managed by groups that tend to overlook the complexity of practice across disciplines, and restricted forms and unsophisticated assessment activities (Boud and Falchikov 2008: 92). The second problem lies with the learners. For Boud and Falchikov (2008), what hinders students most is the influence of their past experience of being assessed on what they expect and how they behave now. That is, students experiencing humiliation or distress in assessment may be offensive or respond negatively to it, and it is difficult to change the expected role of students in learning and assessment (*ibid.*). The third is that it is challenging to prepare students for an unpredictable future in the age termed by Barnett (2000) as 'supercomplexity' since the dominant perspective of LLL highlights employability, yet employment requirements may not be predicted due to rapid changes of the world (ibid). Finally, lacking alignment among curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment activities, and learning outcomes in the whole programme also hinders the implementation of sustainable assessment (*ibid.*)

Acknowledging these problems helps us evaluate possible barriers that we may encounter if we apply the framework so that we can have appropriate solutions. As sustainable assessment implies a change from a measurement into an educational assessment discourse (Boud 2007), it is important to educational reforms since it provides a vision for universities, policy makers, and lecturers to think about and reconceptualise their assessment perspectives, policies, and practices in order to prepare students for LLL.

3.6 Conclusion

The conceptual framework for this study of assessment draws in the first instance on Boud's framework of sustainable assessment. Related to this overarching framework and enriching it are concerns with students' intrinsic educational development, their development as lifelong learners and the formation of their multi-dimensional attributes and functionings in context of globalisation and knowledge economy drivers which privilege human capital and the instrumental ends of HE. It is further situated against practices of assessment and feedback which seems not to be working well in universities. Taken together these ideas frame the methodology, methods and data analysis. What is then possible in the contexts of UK and Vietnamese HE, informed by the theorisations and literatures sketched in this thesis, will then be explored using empirical data.

4 Chapter four: Methodology and methods

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is a critical narrative of my research journey, which was challenging, with difficulties and uncertainties I encountered and tried to overcome, yet interesting and rewarding when it helped improve my learning experience in doing cross-national research and nurturing my hope of contributing to potential changes in assessment, especially in the Vietnamese context. I will discuss my epistemological stance, theoretical perspective, comparative research in its relations to globalisation, postcolonialism, and internationalisation, and positionality of myself as the researcher. I will then describe, explain, and critique the methodology as a case study which is qualitative, comparative and collective, and methods of data collection, including semi-structured interviews with 22 staff in both cases, four final year student focus groups, an action-based intervention at the English department of the HCMU, and policy document analysis. Finally, I will explain how the data was analysed.

For Crotty (2003: 3), there are four important interrelated elements that need to be considered before conducting a study: the *methods* to be utilized, the *methodology* justifying the utility of these methods, the *theoretical perspective* informing and explaining the methodology, and the *epistemology* accommodated in the theoretical perspective and the methodology and explaining the meaning of knowledge. In the next sections, I will describe and explain the choices of these elements in my research.

4.2 Epistemology and theoretical perspective – constructionism and interpretivism

Epistemology refers to how we understand and explain the theory of knowledge and includes *objectivism*, *constructionism* and *subjectivism* (Crotty 2003: 3). From objectivists' perspective, meaning (or truth) exists inherently in the object and independently from people and waits to be discovered (Bryman 2008; Crotty 2003; Wellington 2000). In contrast, constructionists argue that meaning is 'a human construct' and thus cannot be independent from people; instead, it is constructed differently by different people through their interaction with the real world (the object) and is constantly revised (Crotty 2003). Different from objectivists and constructionists, subjectivists maintain that meaning is not formed by the interaction between the subject and the object, but inflicted by the subject on the object (Crotty 2003).

Epistemology, for Crotty (2003), plays the role of informing a *theoretical perspective*. He classifies *theoretical perspective* into different types; among them are the two contrasting approaches, *positivism* and *interpretivism*. *Positivism* is about applying the methods of natural sciences to study social sciences with the belief that knowledge is objective and separated from the knower, and thus positivists seek generalisations that are independent from time, values and contexts (Bryman 2008; Cousin 2009; Crotty 2003; Wellington 2000). Therefore, *positivism* is embodied in *objectivism*.

Meanwhile, for *interpretivists*, knowledge is a human construct and thus it is subjective and inseparable from the subject and should be understood and interpreted in its relation to time, values, and social contexts (*ibid.*). Thus, *interpretivism* is incorporated in *constructionism*. One of the key differences between *positivism* and *interpretivism* is, as Cousin states:

> Cultures of inquiry associated with positivism could be said to pursue *explanations* of and *predictions* about human behaviour, while those associated with interpretivism aspire to generate *understandings* and *insights* in contexts that are held to be inherently too unstable for reliable predictions to be made.
>
> (2009: 9)

This research took c*onstructionism* and *interpretivism* as its epistemological stance and theoretical perspective because I share constructionists' belief that people's conceptions, experience, and practices of assessment in the research are constructed, developed, or transferred through their interaction with other people and the real world around them. Because the research was carried out with participants in two countries, their conceptions and experience were assumed to be constructed differently due to their own socio-cultural values and economic and HE contexts. Also, the research sought understandings and insights on assessment from multiple perspectives – senior managers, lecturers, and students in the UK and Vietnam – in order to find out and explain the differences and similarities. For these reasons, *constructionism* and *interpretivism* were adopted as the epistemology and theoretical perspective that guided the methodology and methods in this research.

4.3 Methodology and methods

Methodology is defined as a strategy, plan, or activity that selects, determines and evaluates the methods used in research (Crotty 2003 ; Wellington 2000). The methodology in this research is 'case study', which is *qualitative*, *comparative*, and *collective*. It was chosen in justification of own features, strengths, and potential weaknesses of case study, as well as in comparison with other methodologies.

Case study is defined by Stake (1995: xi) as 'the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity with important circumstances'. This definition highlights some of its key features as being specific, complex, and contextualised, which are also shared by Simons who expands her definition to include aim and research emphasis (2009). For her, case study is in-depth, empirical, carried out in real life contexts, and allows multiple perspectives and various methods of data collection. Thomas (2011: 12-14) develops these features further with the inclusion of two combined components: a 'subject' – what we are interested in studying, and an 'analytical frame' – the theoretical base for our study. Different from Stake and Simons, Thomas (2011) focuses more on the analytical aspect of case study: 'The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provide an analytical frame – an object – within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates' (p. 23). Each of these definitions emphasises different features which are simultaneously strengths of case study, and they provide the rationale for me to choose case study as the methodology in my research.

For Stake (2005) and Simons (2009), case study is not obligatorily qualitative; although qualitative methods are more frequently used in case study because qualitative enquiry allows in-depth and contextualised exploration and interpretation of the research topic. Taking its epistemological stance as constructionism and the theoretical perspective as interpretivism, as well as its purpose of in-depth and detailed understandings and explanations of assessment in two cases through multiple perspectives in the UK and Vietnamese contexts, my case study is naturally qualitative. It encompasses the features of qualitative research identified by Luttrell:

> Qualitative research is defined by an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why. Qualitative research is committed to participants using their own words to make sense of their lives; it places an importance on context and process; it rest on a dialectic between inductive and deductive reasoning; and uses iterative strategies to comprehend the relationship between social life and individual subjectivities. Doing qualitative research involves a healthy scepticism about whether "to see is to know", and instead calls upon us to look at people (including ourselves as investigators), places and events through multiple and critical lens.
>
> (2010:1)

Stake (1995, 2005) classifies case study into three types: *intrinsic*, *instrumental*, and *multiple* or *collective*. *Intrinsic* means the study is made because of the researcher's interest in understanding the case itself; *instrumental* refers to using the case to understand something else, not the case itself; *multiple* or *collective* is a special form of instrumental case study that comprises of a number of cases (Stake 2005: 445–446). *Comparative* cases also belong to *multiple* or *collective* (Thomas 2011: 141). Apart from these three types, there are '*cases within the case*' which Stake calls 'embedded' or 'mini cases' (Stake 2005: 451). From such distinction, my research is *comparative* because it explored the similarities and differences between the two UK and Vietnamese cases. Thus, this case study is *collective* because it includes a number of cases. There is also a mini case – the peer-feedback intervention in the English department of the HCMU – Vietnam.

Thus, the above-mentioned features of qualitative case study by Stake (2005), Simons (2009), Luttrell (2010), and Thomas (2011) can be summarised and illuminated in my case study research, as in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Illuminating features and strengths of qualitative case study with my research

Features and strengths of qualitative case study	**My case study research**
Design and type	Qualitative, comparative, and collective
Two parts of a case: • The subject • The analytical frame	• Student assessment. • Boud's framework of sustainable assessment.
Bounded and unique	Explored only two cases: one in the UK and one in Vietnam
In-depth, detailed explorations and understandings and insights of the complexity and particularity of a case , and its rich, holistic picture	In-depth, detailed understandings and insights of assessment in the two cases and their rich, holistic pictures, as well as explanations of their similarities and differences
Multiple perspectives and contested viewpoints	Multiple and contested viewpoints of different types of participants: senior managers, lecturers, and students.
Real-life contexts	Data was collected and interpreted in the context of the Sociology and English departments of the MU and the HCMU and in the HE, economic, socio-cultural contexts of the UK and Vietnam.

Together with the justification of its features and strengths, the comparison between case study and other methodologies was also a base for the selection of case study as my research methodology.

4.3.1 Case study compared with other methodologies and illuminated in my research

Other methodologies, such as survey and experiment, did not seem appropriate. This can be seen through the comparison between survey and experiment with case study by Hammersley and Gomm (2000, in Thomas 2011: 10), Hammersley (2010), and Thomas (2011:11), which is also illuminated with my case study research, as in Table 4.2. Like survey and experiment, ethnography was also not suitable since one of the key methods of ethnography is observation (Cousin 2009). However, due to the research questions, observation is not a preference in this research. Apart from these above compared features and strengths, there are also assumptions about limitations of case study; among them are subjectivity and generalisation.

Table 4.2 Case study compared with other methodologies and illuminated in my research

	Case study	**My case study research**	**Experiment**	**Survey**
Investigates	one case or a small number of cases	a small number of cases, including two departments of each university and one mini case as intervention	a relatively large number of cases	A relatively large number of cases
Data collected and analysed about...	a large number of features of each case	different features of assessment policies, perspectives and practices	a small number features of each case	A small number of features of each case
Study of...	naturally occurring cases where the aim is not to control variables	naturally occurring cases: how assessment is carried out at the selected departments of the two universities	cases where the aim is to control variables	naturally occurring cases selected to maximise the sample's representativeness of a wider population
Quantification of data...	is not a priority	qualitative data	is a priority	is a priority
Using...	many methods and sources of data	various qualitative methods: policy document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and intervention	one method	one method
Aiming to...	look at relationships and processes	Explore and compare the assessment process, policies, and perspectives in the UK and Vietnamese cases in relation to the HE, economic, socio-cultural contexts	look at causation	look for generalisation

(Hammersley and Gomm 2000, in Thomas 2011: 10; Hammersley 2010, Thomas 2011:11)

4.3.2 Subjectivity and generalisation in qualitative case study research

The potential weaknesses of qualitative case study are perceived to include its subjectivity and the impossibility of generalisation. However, Stake (2005) and Simons (2009) maintain that subjectivity is unavoidable and to some extent can be considered as the strength in exploring and interpreting a qualitative case. As Stake explains, most case study research is ‘the empirical study of human activity’, thus qualitative data is necessarily subjective because it is generated from people’s opinions, feeling, and experience in their own circumstances and contexts (2005: 454). For him, one of the ways to reduce too much subjectivity is triangulation – using different methods of data collection.

In terms of generalisation, for Simons (2009) it is not always needed because case study aims at ‘particularisation – to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or add to knowledge of a specific topic’ (p.24). Also, it is argued that it is possible to generalise from a qualitative case study, not statistical generalisation as in a survey, but rather what Bassey (1999: 12) terms as ‘*fuzzy generalisation*’, referring to uncertain claims, such as ‘it is likely’, ‘it is possible’, ‘may be’ and so on. It is also possible to make what Stake (2005) calls ‘*naturalistic generalisation*’– generalisation made completely from ‘personal or vicarious experience’ (p. 454). That is, based on their experience, people can make inferences or link what is relevant in the case to their own circumstances or contexts. Case study also allows ‘*cross-case generalisation*’, explained by Simons (2009: 164) as generation bounded within collective cases and generated from the analysis of the similarities, differences, and interconnection between these cases.

The data in my research is mostly qualitative. The rigorous triangulation of methods – 'documentary analysis', 'semi-structured interview', 'focus group', and 'intervention' – and reasoned analysis helps avoid the pitfall of subjectivity, misinterpretation, or bias. In addition, I focus more on particularisation in hoping to provide a rich and holistic picture of student assessment in the UK and Vietnamese cases. Thus, this research can bring about the above-mentioned 'cross-case, naturalistic, or fuzzy generalisation' that may be inferred and hopefully lead to potential changes in assessment, especially in the Vietnamese HE context.

Given its features and strengths compared with other methodologies and its potential weaknesses, case study seemed to be the most suitable methodology for this research in which the following methods of data collection: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and intervention were applied. These methods will be discussed in the data collection process. The next section will explore comparative research and its relation to globalisation, internationalisation, and postcolonialism, as well as justifying how these issues influenced the data collection and analysis.

4.4 Comparative research in relation to globalisation, internationalisation, and postcolonialism

Comparative education, according to Crossley and Watson (2003), is a complicated and multi-dimensional field that brings difficulties to definition and challenges to research. Yet, for them, its purposes and reasons seem to be more easily clarified in the literature, including: (i) to better understand one's own education system; (ii) to better understand other cultures and their education systems as well as the link between education and the broader society; (iii) to find out how education is similar or different in different countries and what the problems are in order to improve educational policy and practice; and (iv) to develop better understanding and collaboration among countries in being sensitive to different perspectives and cultures in the world. These purposes and reasons help shape the analytical framework of comparative research. However, whichever purposes it aims at, the discourse of comparative education, for Crossley and Watson, needs to be reconceptualised due to the growing criticism of the universalised perspective of globalisation in explaining the relationships between globalisation and education as well as the call for applying post-colonial theory in comparative education research in the current literature.

4.4.1 Comparative research in relation to globalisation, internationalisation, and postcolonialism

The universalized approach in understanding the relationships between globalisation and education is criticized by a number of authors (e.g. Crossley and Watson 2003; Rizvi 2005; Rizvi *et al.* 2006; Latvia 2007) for its focus on the global context and imposition of a dominant neo-liberal Western ideology on the non-western world, especially developing postcolonised countries. In so doing, as these authors argue, this approach fails to take into consideration the local historical, political, cultural, socio-economic context, including how a particular country and its people interpret and deal with globalisation historically, what they gain and lose from that process, and how they do things with what they have. Also, for them, neo-liberal ideology, language and educational discourses are imposed from 'the West' to 'the rest', thus the voice of the 'subalterns' – the postcolonial or developing countries – is not heard (Tikly 2004; Latvia 2007).

Therefore, Crossley and Watson (2003), Rizvi (2005), Rizvi *et al.* (2006), and Latvia (2007) suggest linking postcolonialism with globalisation in understanding the relationships between globalisation and education, especially in developing countries, as postcolonial theory emphasises the importance of contextual and cultural diversity, the resistance of Western domination, local identity, history and experiences. Although there is convergence in educational systems, processes, policies and practices in the world due to globalisation, local differences should be recognised. As Rizvi *et al.* (2006) state, the relationships between globalisation and education, 'need to be understood historically as being linked to the colonial origins of globalisation, not in some uniform way but in ways that are specific to particular localities' (p. 257). Also, Crossley (2008, 2009) emphasises 'bridging cultures and traditions' in comparative research, for instance, the past with the present, research in the West and the non-western world in order to highlight diversities. Being aware of diversities in culture and context are the issues that should be emphasized in comparative education and international transfer (Crossley and Watson 2003; Crossley 2008, 2009; Phillips and Schweisfurth 2008; Phillips 2009). This helps us understand more about how and why education in other countries are different from our own, and thus avoid the threat of borrowing an educational policy or practice uncritically. Sadler stated that:

> In studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of the forgotten struggles and difficulties and 'of battles long ago'. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life.
>
> (Sadler 1990, in Phillips 2009: 1062-1063)

4.4.2 Influences of these issues on my research

How do the above-mentioned issues influence my research? Taking the contexts of the two cases, UK HE seems to be driven by globalisation and the knowledge economy; meanwhile, Vietnamese HE is not only influenced by globalisation and the knowledge economy but also by colonisation and internationalisation throughout its history. Thus, these issues provide the bases for the data collection and analysis process. They help explore and understand the data, as well as analyse, compare, contrast, and explain how and why the assessment policies, perspectives and practices in the cases study in Vietnam and the UK are similar and different from each other. Such explanation about the similarities and differences in student assessment in these cases is situated not only in 'the things inside the schools' but in a broader context – 'the things outside the school'. These include, for example, how do globalisation and the knowledge economy influence and shape HE, assessment, and LLL in the UK and Vietnam? How do the national historical, political, cultural, and socio-economic contexts influence and shape the assessment policies, perspectives and practices so that they are the way as they are in the cases study? How do the borrowing of assessment policies and practices from Western HE work at the two departments of the HCMU?

In brief, this section has explored issues on comparative research in relation to globalisation, internationalisation, postcolonialism, and how they have influenced the data collection and analysis in this research. The next section will discuss the positionality of the researcher, focusing on how I positioned myself when doing this cross-national comparative case study.

4.5 Positionality of the researcher

For Pillow (2010), the researcher needs to be self-reflexive; that is, being critically aware of the influences of her identity and position on the research. Having thorough understanding about her being and role is important because it helps the researcher not to judge or impose her own values and assumptions on 'the subject's ways of knowing and being' and manipulate her 'assumptions and bias' during the data analysis and writing process (Pillow 2010: 272). Doing a comparative study, I was differently positioned for the UK and Vietnamese cases. In the Vietnamese case, I am a lecturer who has been teaching at university for around ten years, and this was an advantage for me to better understand the Vietnamese lecturers' and students' viewpoints and the broader contexts, and thus made the research process less challenging. At the same time, I needed to be conscious about assumptions on teaching, learning, and assessment in Vietnamese HE which had long rooted in my thought and reminded myself not to influence the interviewers with my own view. Also, many research studies about Vietnam published internationally have been written by scholars from the Western world. Therefore, this research was one of the voices of 'the subalterns' (Latvia 2007) with the story about the Vietnamese HE assessment narrated by a Vietnamese.

However, when doing the case study in the UK, I am a doctoral student who came to the UK for the first time, and thus things were strange for me. I had to be aware of language and cultural barriers, as well as my limited understanding about how the UK system works in order to ask follow up questions for deeper and more detailed information. During the interview, I had to overcome the feeling of being powerless in the role of a student interviewing lecturers and a person who comes not from 'the West' but 'the rest' (Latvia 2007). I also had to be aware of falling into the trap of presenting the Vietnamese case that belongs to 'the rest' as always bad and deficient and the UK case of 'the West' as always excellent when analysing the data.

4.6 Data collection process

This section will describe how the research was carried out at the English and Sociology department of the MU – UK and the HCMU – Vietnam. The selection of these departments was based on the common features shared by both universities, such as having high quality and emphasising internationalisation, similarities in subject disciplines of the two departments, and accessibility (which has been discussed in Chapter one). The research at the MU was conducted from November 2009 to February 2010 and at the

HCMU from April to June 2010. The methods of data collection are summarised in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Summary of the methods of data collection in this study

Methods of data collection	**The HCMU's English and Sociology departments**	**The MU's English and Sociology departments**
Semi structured interviews (with 22 staff)	The University Head of Assessment and ten staff (2 Deans, 1 vice-Dean, and 7 lecturers)	The University Head of Assessment and ten staff (2 Directors of Assessment, 2 Director of undergraduate programmes and 6 lecturers)
Focus groups (four groups of final year students)	2 final year student focus groups (6 students/each)	2 final year student focus groups (Sociology: 4 students; English: 7 students)
Document analysis	Policy documents related to assessment at university level and at the two selected departments	Policy documents related to assessment at university level and at the two selected departments
The peer feedback intervention (Implemented in the course *Critical Thinking 1* with 25 students of the HCMU's English department.)	(i) Students' feedback on their peers' essays; (ii) a qualitative questionnaire for 25 students; (iii) a focus group with five students;(iv) a semi-structured interview with the lecturer teaching this course.	

In this section, I will describe my data collection process, including: *getting started* – ethical considerations, gaining access to the sites and finding participants – and *methods of data collection* – document analysis, semi-structured interview, focus group, and the peer-feedback intervention.

4.6.1 Getting started

(i) <u>Ethical considerations</u>

Before conducting the case study, I had to go through the Research Ethics Approval from the School of Education in which all documents, such as my statement of research ethics, an information letter including a summary of the research and its purpose, a statement on how I would gain access to the sites, my research aims and methods of data collection, were reviewed and approved by the School's Research Ethics Committee. At the same time, I designed sets of questions for interviews and focus groups. During the data collection and analysis, three ethical issues suggested by Kvale (1996) as 'informed consent', 'confidentiality', and 'consequences' (153–154) were also strictly followed. Accordingly, contacts with the selected departments of the two universities were made with an information letter including clear purposes and outline issues of my study sent to all participants. Before the interviews or focus groups started, the participants were also asked to sign a consent form to be recorded, and they could also stop any time they wanted to. All the data was confidential, and pseudonyms for two universities and all participants were used to protect anonymity. In addition, because the research is comparative, cultural differences were also considered in order to avoid 'the risk of unconsciously breaching cultural norms through the lens of one's own' (Piper and Simons 2005: 58). Thus, the data from the UK and Vietnamese cases were viewed through different lens of their own national contexts during the collection and analysis processes.

(ii) Gaining access to the sites and finding participants for the research

After getting Research Ethics Approval, I started my data collection process by gaining access to the sites and finding participants to take part in the research. I decided to choose the MU and the HCMU because I had contacts in both to enable my access. The selection of the departments as research sites was based on the similarities in subject disciplines and accessibility.

- Gaining access and finding participants in the UK case

It was the first time I had done research in a foreign country, and everything was new and strange for me. Thus, I approached the UK case with mixed feelings: excitement, worries, and uncertainties. My initial intention was to choose History and Sociology, which could be well represented for social sciences and humanities. However, when emailing an information letter that introduced who I was and the purposes and outline issues of my research to the University Head of Assessment and the Head of History and Sociology departments in order to ask for permission to do fieldwork there (Appendix 1), I was rejected by History. I was very worried thinking about the possibility that I could be rejected by all departments. Fortunately, the University Director of Assessment and the Head of Sociology agreed, and I then tried the English department and was accepted. The Head of these two departments suggested key participants in charge of assessment, teaching and learning. In addition, I also emailed the information letter to these key participants and some other lecturers randomly chosen from the staff list on the website.

Finally, 11 staff agreed to take part in the semi-structured interviews of 45 minutes to one hour (Appendix 2).

While most lecturers were very supportive and willing to help, it was much more difficult to get third year students for the focus groups. With permission from the administrative staff, posters which included the information and purpose of the research, an offer of £10 to each participant, as well as my mobile phone number and email were posted on the notice board for undergraduates and other advertisement boards at the two departments (Appendix 3). I also came to one Sociology third-year session to introduce my research for 10 minutes and left the posters there so that those who were interested could make further contact. Some students, but not many, called and emailed me, and we agreed on the time for the one-hour focus group interview. Before that, I phoned, texted, and emailed all participants to inform them the time and place; yet only some of them replied. This made me worried that the ones who did not confirm would not come. However, they were all present, which was a great relief to me. Finally, I managed to have two student focus groups: four students in Sociology (one of them was student representative) and seven students in English (Appendix 4).

In brief, in the UK case, the staff participants were more representative, with senior managers, junior and senior lecturers. Meanwhile, students who participated in the two focus groups might not be representative and selective enough. Due to the difficulties in getting access to students, the focus group participants were only those who I could get hold of. However, gaining access and finding participants in the Vietnamese case was a completely different story.

- Gaining access and finding participants in the Vietnamese case

The way of gaining access in the Vietnamese case was less challenging and difficult because I was familiar with the site, knew the Deans of the two departments, and could find participants. Because I already knew people in the departments, we could establish mutual trust and understanding, which was an important factor that decided whether they allowed me to do the research or agreed to participate and told me what they actually thought and did. While all contacts with the UK lecturers were through emails, in the Vietnamese case, face-to-face communication was more effective. Therefore, with the information letter signed by my supervisor (Appendix 5), I met with the Deans of English and Sociology and asked for their permission to do research at these two departments. They were very supportive and introduced me to the lecturers so that I could meet or phone them in order to invite them to participate in the research. I then emailed them the information letter translated into Vietnamese so that they knew more about the research before the interview. Similar to the UK case, 11 staff were interviewed, and the lecturers in the two departments also included both junior and senior staff (Appendix 6).

In contrast to the UK case where it was very difficult to get final-year students for the focus groups, this process was much easier in the Vietnamese case. I asked the lecturers in charge of final year students to inform them about my research and that I needed six volunteers to stay after a class session for a one-hour focus group interview. Due to the Vietnamese tradition of respecting teachers, students were very willing to help without expecting any money in return. Thus, I easily got six students for each focus group (Appendix 6). Unlike the UK case, these students were more selective in that there was a student representative in each group, and they had attended at least one of the courses of the lecturers I interviewed.

4.6.2 Methods of data collection

As mentioned earlier, the following methods were used for data collection: policy document analysis, semi-structured interview, focus group, and peer-feedback intervention. This section will describe and justify these methods respectively. The analysis of the data sets will be discussed in the next section.

(i) <u>Policy document analysis</u>

Although there are some weaknesses of documentary data, for example, they may be sometimes difficult to retrieve and biased in selection and reporting, this method includes more strengths that helped determine why it was used in this research: *stability* (able to be constantly reviewed), *unobtrusiveness* (not from the case study results), *accuracy* (of names, dates, details, etc.), and *covering a wide range* (various settings and events) (Yin 2009: 102). The selection of relevant documents followed four criteria recommended by Scott:

(i) *Authenticity*: Is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?
(ii) *Credibility*: Is the evidence free from error and distortion?

(iii) *Representativeness*: Is the evidence typical of its kind and, if not, is the extent of its untypicality known?

(iv) *Meaning:* Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

(1990: 6, in Wellington 2000: 114)

Based on those criteria, the following documents were chosen: assessment policies or guidelines, such as the QAA – UK and the Vietnamese MOET's assessment policies at national HE level. At University and departmental level, there were the University's strategic plans and assessment policies, undergraduate course descriptions, student handbooks (the MU), and departmental self-evaluation reports (the HCMU), and other relevant documents on teaching, learning, and assessment (Appendix 7). These documents were used to provide contextual information about the two cases and as complementary to the analysis of staff interviews and student focus groups. To protect confidentiality, University documents have been referenced using the pseudonyms of each university.

(ii) <u>Semi-structured interviews</u>

- Justifying the choice of semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 22 staff at both sites. Semi-structured interviews were employed in this research due to their strengths compared with structured and unstructured interviews. In structured interviews, while it is easy and quick to manage and code the data, the questions tend to be rigid, mirror the researcher's view, and these interviews cannot make good use of face-to-face communication between the researcher and the participant (Bryman 2008; Thomas 2011). In contrast, unstructured and semi-structured interviews provide flexibility, and richer and more detailed answers from the interviewee's perspectives (Bryman 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). However, an unstructured interview is like a conversation directed by the interviewees with no questions prepared in advance Thomas (2011: 163), which would be difficult for me, especially in a foreign language as in the UK case, and simultaneously risky because I might end up collecting unhelpful or unnecessary data. Meanwhile, in semi-structured interviewing, the interviewer can have a list of issues as guidelines and freedom for 'probes' – asking the interviewees to clarify or elaborate or provide more information related to their answers (May 2001; Thomas 2011). Thus, semi-structured interviewing helped me to keep a focus on the main points, ensure that all important issues were covered, as well as get in-depth and more detailed information and explanation through follow-up questions, which was why it was chosen in this research. In addition to these strengths, there were some limitations of interviews, as pointed out by Yin (2009), that they could be biased due to poorly asked questions and biased answers, and the interviewees may remember the information inaccurately or provide the answer that the interviewer wants to hear. They needed to be taken into consideration by being reflexive and aware of the conditions of the interview and careful and rigorous in my data analysis.

- Conducting the interviews

The interviews with senior managers and lecturers had different foci in that those with lecturers centred on the assessment methods they were applying in their own courses, why they applied these methods, and which alternative assessment they would like to use if they had a choice. Meanwhile, the discussion with senior managers concentrated more on what they did in their managerial roles, the University and departmental assessment policies and how they were implemented, and the effectiveness of these policies. For those senior managers who also taught, the same questions about their assessment methods were asked. These questions were first piloted with one UK and one Vietnamese lecturer for adjustment. After each interview, I listened to the recorded interview again and reviewed the questions in order to decide what issues needed more in-depth discussions, which questions could be used effectively, and which ones should be removed.

I conducted the interviews in the two sites with different feelings and power positions. When I started the first interview of the UK case, because the interviews were carried out in English – a foreign language to me, I was very nervous and worried that I would miss any main points, be unable to make the conversation flow smoothly, or fail to ask probing questions to get detailed and insightful data. However, all the interviewees were cooperative, friendly and helpful, and we soon developed ‘rapport’ or ‘mutual trust’ May (2001: 130) built in the power relation between the interviewees as lecturers and myself as research student coming from a developing country. Such power relation can be described as imbalanced, disadvantageous and marginalised in my part (O’Leary 2004: 46). However, during the interview, I perceived it as an advantage for me: in trying to help somebody who was a student researcher and unfamiliar with the UK system, these lecturers kindly provided me with very clear and detailed explanation of what they were doing and offered further contacts for more questions and clarification if needed.

Unlike the UK case, I did the interviews in Vietnam with more confidence partly because the interviews were in Vietnamese, and partly because, as above mentioned, we somehow knew each other, and thus there was already rapport or mutual understanding and trust between the interviewees and me. Also, here, our power positions seem to be more ‘equal’ because we were colleagues. Therefore, the conversations were more about sharing with a colleague about what they were doing.

In brief, this process provided me with different but valuable experiences about doing cross-national interviews, and what I gained was not only the data but also help, trust, and sharing of academics across cultures. In the next section, I will describe and justify another method in addition to document analysis and semi-structured interview – focus groups.

(iii) Student focus groups

Four focus groups were carried out at the two sites. The focus group technique is an interview with a small group of people on a particular topic, which, for Bryman (2008) differs from group interviews in three respects: Firstly, it is centred on in-depth exploration of a topic, while group interviews often have a wider coverage; secondly, focus groups are conducted not for the reason of saving time and money as with group interviews; thirdly, in focus groups, the researcher’s interest is in how people, ‘discuss a certain issue as members of a group rather than simply as individuals', that is, it studies how group members construct meanings around an issue through their interaction and discussion with each other (p. 473–476). In addition, as Thomas (2011) points out, focus groups differ from group interviews in that the researcher in focus groups facilitates or moderates the discussion; meanwhile, in group interviews, the researcher leads or controls the discussions. Therefore, focus groups seem to empower the participants more than group interviews. For these reasons, focus group was chosen as one of the methods of data collection. However, I was also aware that the focus group technique might entail some practical problems identified by Bryman, such as being difficult to organise and analyse the data, taking more time to transcribe the recording, and a prominent speaker may control the discussion, as well as influence other members' point of view (2008: 488–489).

All focus groups in this research were informal discussions about the final year students' experience on assessment that focused on the three key issues: *what assessment methods they liked and disliked*, *why they liked and disliked these methods*, and *how they would like to be assessed*. In the discussions, I played the role of facilitator, asking probing questions, bringing the students back to the main point whenever they wandered away from the subject, and encouraging all of them to contribute their ideas in order to avoid the situation that only one or two students were dominant speakers. In general, the students had open, friendly and straightforward discussions about their assessment experiences, which provided helpful and interesting data analysed together with the data from the staff's interviews.

(iv) The peer feedback intervention

I also introduced an intervention during the research in which an assessment strategy adapted from the UK context was tried out in Vietnam. The aim of this intervention was to explore how one of the key features of Boud's framework – *developing informed judgement* – worked through peer-feedback activities in a very different context like Vietnam in order to contribute to the application of strategic borrowing of international perspective and practices. It is recognised that the intervention is only a limited, mini case within a bigger case study and that in an assessment culture where examinations have been dominant and the students are not familiar with peer feedback, it may not make an impact or lead to change.

The original peer feedback intervention was developed originally by Dr. Grant, a lecturer in the English department in the MU in his course *Gothic Literature,* in which students post two pieces of feedback on their peers' essays through Web CT, using the lecturer's set of peer-feedback guidelines. The task was considered by Dr. Grant and his students as an effective way to develop students' constructive criticism, self-reflection and effective collaboration. Persuaded and motivated by having seen this as an example of peer feedback that can support students to learn, I decided to construct a small scale action research process in order to explore how the strategically borrowed practice of peer feedback worked in the Vietnamese HE context and how possible it was in helping improve student learning. With Dr. Grant's permission to use his peer feedback guidelines, I convinced Dr. Lam – Vice-

Dean of the English department to integrate a peer feedback task into his course.

Explanation of the Peer feedback task
The peer feedback task was integrated into *Critical Thinking 1* – a reading course involved mainly with understanding, critically analysing and evaluating reading passages where students' writing skills are also assessed with reading skills. However, unlike the UK case, it was more convenient to carry out the task in class because Web CT was not available. The guidelines were also adjusted in order to be suitable for the Vietnamese context, distributed to students one week before the task so that they could have some ideas about how to give peer feedback, and clearly explained to them in the following session. After the explanation, students wrote an essay for 90 minutes about what qualities a successful young person in Vietnam today should possess.

The essays for the peer feedback were collected, anonymised, and numbered by the lecturer. In the next session, each was randomly assigned to another student to give peer feedback for 60 minutes. The assessors were required to write their name on the feedback because it counted 10% of the total grade in this course. Dr. Lam also gave his own feedback on the essays and students' peer feedback. Finally, the essays were redistributed to the original writer to look at in order to adjust and improve their writing. Students then completed a qualitative questionnaire on what they liked and disliked about the task and how it could be changed or adjusted, which was followed by an interview with Dr. Lam and a focus group with five students for further and more detailed discussions around their perspectives on the peer feedback practice. A few questions in the questionnaire, focus group, and the lecturer's interview were adapted from Vu and Dall'Alba's (2007) research. Thus, the analysis of this intervention was based on these four sources of data: students' feedback on their peer's essay, students' qualitative questionnaire, the interview with Dr. Lam, and the student focus group interview.

To sum up, I have described and justified the data collection process with ethical considerations, getting access and finding participants, as well as methods of data collection – policy document analysis, semi-structured interviews, student focus groups, and the peer-feedback intervention. I now move on to the final section in this chapter – the analysis of the data sets.

4.6.3 Data analysis

The data sets were grouped and analysed according to themes and subthemes. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed, coded into themes and subthemes, and analysed together with policy documents. The analysis process started after the first interview, as recommended by Luker (2008: 174) as 'the best way' to do data analysis. As I used Boud's framework of sustainable assessment for data analysis, the main themes were its eight operationalised elements – (i) *engaging students (ii) authentic activities, (iii) students design assessment, (iv) integrative activities, (v) learning and judgement, (vi) modelling and practice, (vii) working with peers* and *(viii) giving and receiving feedback* – and subthemes of these elements emerged from the data. There were also other main themes and subthemes coming out from the data that went beyond these eight elements, and they were grouped into the key features of assessment in the UK or Vietnamese case; for example: *The assessment regime, assessment methods, marking, professional* *development (PD), constraints*, and so on (see Appendix 8). The data from the peer feedback intervention were analysed separately, using different themes and subthemes, such as *what students learned from the peer feedback task*, *difficulties students encountered*, *examples of students' peer feedback*, *conditions for future implementation*. The process of collecting, transcribing, translating, and coding the data in the Vietnamese case from Vietnamese into English also provided a rough understanding and analysis of the data.

The data then was analysed into three stages, as identified by Merriam (2009) as: *description*, *analysis*, and *theorising*. Thus, the analysis included the descriptive chapters of key features of assessment which served as the bases for the analytical chapters of operationlised elements of Boud's framework in both the UK and Vietnamese cases. The final comparative and theorising chapter compared and contrasted the two cases in a multi-dimensional way, explained the similarities and differences, and reworked on Boud's framework of sustainable assessment. In these three stages, discourse analysis was used for both spoken texts – semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as well as written texts – policy documents, qualitative questionnaire, and students' peer feedback. Discourse analysis studies people's use of language and the meanings of their utterances in relation to social context, their ideology and power (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Thus, in highlighting social interaction, it provides in-depth and contextualised interpretation of the data (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). For these reasons, discourse analysis was used in this study to interpret and explain how senior managers, lecturers, and students viewed and experienced assessment policy and practices in different power positions, ideology, and national contexts. It was also used to explore the language used in the policy documents in the UK and Vietnamese cases and examine discourse strategies students employed in the feedback they wrote in their peers' essays. Conversation analysis was not chosen since, with its emphasis on 'the minute details of talk-in-interaction', it seemed to be narrow and thus might not be able to interpret the data in depth (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 221).

4.7 Limitations of the study

Like any other research projects, this study has some limitations. Due to the difficulties in getting UK students to participate in the research, I only undertook student focus groups with those I could reach; thus their ideas may not be representative enough for most students in the two departments. Also, at first, I intended to do a mini comparative case within the bigger cases comparing the UK students' peer feedback and their opinions about the peer feedback task in Dr. Grant's course *Gothic Literature* with the Vietnamese students in the peer-feedback intervention in Vietnam. However, I could not reach UK students in this course for a focus group interview, and neither could I see their peer feedback as explained by Dr. Grant that it was confidential. Therefore, I could only do the peer-feedback intervention instead of the mini comparative case.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has described and critiqued issues about the epistemology – constructionism, theoretical perspective – interpretivism, comparative research, and the positionality of the researcher in this study. The methodology as case study, which is qualitative, comparative, and collective, has been justified as the most appropriate method for this research with its strengths and weaknesses and in comparison with other methods. The chapter has also explained the methods of data collection and analysis process. More about the data analysis will be found in the following chapters. Chapters five and six will present the findings from the UK case: chapter five will describe and explain key assessment features in MU's Sociology and English departments, and chapter six will operationalise key elements of Boud's framework for the MU. Chapters seven and eight will explore similar issues for the Vietnamese case as for the UK case. Finally, chapter nine will compare and contrast the two cases through their key assessment features and the lens of Boud's framework, explain the similarities and differences, as well as evaluate and reframe Boud's framework for the two contexts and as a guide to improving practices.

5 Chapter five: Describing and analysing key assessment features in the English and Sociology departments of the MU

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe and analyse key features of assessment policy, perspectives and practices in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy and the department of English Studies of the Midlands University (MU), UK. The findings emerge from the analysis of the following sources of data: *(i) the MU's policy documents related to assessment at university level and at the two selected departments, (ii) the interviews with the University Head of Assessment and ten staff (senior managers and lecturers) in the two selected departments*, and *(iii) two final year English Studies and Sociology student focus groups (with four Sociology and seven English students)*. The chapter will first explore senior managers' and lecturers' perspectives on assessment policy and practices. Then it will discuss the assessment methods in the two departments, features of the marking process, including marking criteria, mark moderation, and second marking, as well as key constraints that may hinder alternative assessment from both the lecturers' and students' perspectives. Finally, issues about professional development will also be analysed.

In this chapter, these research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the features of current assessment policies at the level of the University and in Social Science and Humanities undergraduate programmes

under conditions of globalisation and internationalised HE at the MU, UK in respect of

(iv) student learning

(v) assessment and desirable graduate outcomes

(vi) assessment and LLL.

2. What are the assessment philosophies and practices of lecturers in selected Social Science and Humanities departments of the MU in relation to

(iv) student learning

(v) desirable graduate outcomes

(vi) LLL.

3. What are student experiences of assessment at selected departments of the two universities? In what way (if at all) has assessment developed them as lifelong learners?

In the analysis, I will argue that assessment at these two departments in MU is strongly influenced by neoliberalism, globalisation, and a human capital agenda, but that there exists a crucial contradiction between the managerial, neoliberal way of going about assessment at the centre and the education which happens on the ground.

5.2 Contradiction between managerialism and an educational agenda on assessment

5.2.1 Central managers discussed assessment

At the MU, all assessment-related matters were managed by the University Examinations Office, identified by the University Head of Assessment as a professional support service in terms of assessment policy and operation, such as quality assurance issues, national student surveys (NSS), feedback, exam organisation, and policy formation and implementation. All assessment policy and practices were guided by the Quality Manual developed out of the QAA Code of Practice (QAA 2006) and the Burgess Report (2007). At the University's policy and managerial level, the main goals of assessment seemed to be about maintaining quality and standards. As stated in the overview of the MU's Quality Manual:

> The University is committed to ensuring that methods of assessment are effective in measuring student attainment of the intended learning outcomes and that assessment policy and practices are effective in monitoring the validity, equity and reliability of assessment. (MU's Quality Manual 2009: 1)

In this statement, the language seemed to be that of quality assurance, such as 'measuring', 'validity', 'equity', and reliability'; there was no mention about educating or improving student learning. Thus, the assessment regime might act more as a neoliberal mechanism to measure students' achievement against the learning outcomes for quality assurance, rather than aiming at the educational purpose of assessment as supporting student learning. Likewise, in the interview with the MU's Head of Assessment, procedures of policy formation, implementation and monitoring process were talked through. However, there was no discussion on the educational purpose of assessment and what they wanted students to be:

> I'm responsible for the systems, the processes and the policies which support the assessment of students, so not any of the teaching and any actual assessment of students and setting of assessment, but the support that

> goes into the background of that. So, exam systems, electronic systems, the quality in the University Quality Manual, and the procedures which back up assessing students....Because at the end of the day, you know, we're removed from it in a way we're just organising things and implementing policies.

When explaining about the implementation of the Quality Manual, she focused on its instrumental function for quality assurance in order to maintain efficiency and accountability to the public:

> It's something to measure quality and standards against, and it gives schools guidance about how to do particular things as well. So it is all about the quality and standard assurance, and it oversees how the University awards degrees and that's the outward-facing product of the institution, the students go out with degrees, and people have to be assured that the quality of the degree is good, and so the Quality Manual is there. This is what we are doing, and this is what we can be measured against. And also the University receives public money, so the public has to be satisfied that the University is maintaining quality and standards.

Again, the language used by the MU's Head of Assessment was arguably a neoliberal management discourse, the language of consumerism that considered HE a product to sell to learners and the public – the customers: 'product', 'public money', 'quality and standards', and 'quality assurance'. In this perspective, management is supposed to keep everything under control. However, she considered her role to support rather than control or impose policies, and the schools could have a lot of autonomy in assessment provided of course that they met the Quality Manual requirements. As she remarked:

> The Quality Manual sets out the procedures and guidance to the things that a school must follow, but it's not prescriptive in how they do things. So the schools have a lot of autonomy on how they actually implement things within their own school as long as they meet the requirements of the Quality Manual....Different schools will do it in different ways, and in some circumstances, you might want all the schools to do it in the same way (laugh), but that's not possible because in the 32 academic schools, by the nature of it, they have to do things especially for their own schools.

Arguably, although she stated that she supported rather than controlled practices, the whole assessment regime still seemed to be tightly controlled and managed in many ways. For example, there were measures to check if everything was carried out the way the management expected and whether the schools did exactly what they were supposed to do:

> Normally something isn't there unless it is a requirement from me and the QAA or it's something that the University thinks it is important. And the University has a number of ways in which it checks if the things have been done in line with the Quality Manual. There used to be something called the University Audit, and that now changes into School Review. As a part of School Review, we're also looking at the policies and how things are working and making sure that the schools are working in line with the Quality Manual guidance.

She also frequently talked to key people at different schools to ensure that everything was in place. Therefore, the process seemed to be very much about compliance driven by the centre. In line with that, assessment at the departmental level was also tightly controlled by senior managers. In both departments, assessment policies and methods had to be accepted by the Teaching and Learning Committee and go through Policy Committee (English) or Course Review (Sociology) to be considered if they were appropriate or if any changes should be made. For Dr. Grant – Director of English Undergraduate Studies, the academic staff did not have much autonomy. Similarly, Dr. Fielding – the Sociology Chair of Teaching Committee confirmed that the staff's autonomy was limited within the University's and department's guidelines and procedures:

> I mean autonomy within…we have the university guidelines...All the module specifications where they decide what they want to do come to the Teaching Committee and we do look at this, and we talk about this: how to evaluate it and what way to do it.

Assessment in Sociology core modules seemed to be rigid with the fixed 50-50 proportion of a 3,000 word essay and two-hour exam decided not by the lecturers teaching these modules but by the school in order to be standardised.

However, in elective modules lecturers had more flexibility for lecturers to choose their own assessment methods:

> We don't have a choice in a core module. It was the school decision for core modules to be assessed with 3000 word essay and two- hour exam as 50-50. We just want them to be standardized, really. For an elective, then that's not the case. You can sit down and think how you assess. So you relatively feel free, but we have, for example, students write 3,000 words on a 10 credit module so that students can have an advantage on different modules. (Dr. Fielding)

5.2.2 Open discussions at the departmental level

At the departmental level, assessment policy formation and practices were perceived as a clear and transparent process with discussions, negotiation and agreements between senior managers and academic staff:

> There are open and democratic discussions, and if there's a proposal from the exam officer at the school meeting, we can either except that or reject that or discuss that. And I think it's really good because it's not just like a top down or order, if you see what I mean. It's not like tomorrow everyone has to do X, Y, Z. In terms of assessment, we all have freedom to do what we want to do really, as long as it meets certain guidelines and so on, and I think that's really good. (Dr. Jones – Sociology)

Also, in both schools, students had their voices in the policy formation and implementation process through dialogues between senior managers and student representatives:

> We have a staff and student committee which meets and there's a chance for student representatives and the members of the staff, including the Director of Undergraduate studies, myself in the role of Director of Exams, Head of School, and the secretary. So it's a process in which the decisions are made jointly. Those committees are set up in order to listen to what the students have to say, and these are mature students' representatives, so they're very effective, I think, and the dialogue is certainly productive. (Dr. Curtis – English Director of Examinations)

Therefore, although lecturers had grounds for flexibility and autonomy in assessment, there existed a management agenda in which the assessment regime seemed to be tightly managed with School Review, Committees, agreements, and so on. This controlled process was to check up and maintain accountability, efficiency, effectiveness and to eliminate risk, and thus there was compliance at the two departments driven by the centre in policy formation and implementation.

5.2.3 Lecturers' educational perspectives on assessment

In contrast to managerialism at the centre, most lecturers in the two departments were trying to educate. Many of them were opposed to the human capital discourse of education and highlighted an educational agenda:

> You know, people are quite resistant to this kind of feeding consumers, we're not sales people. HE can't be treated like a product like that, things like they come and pay their fees, so we have to meet all their demands. Particularly in this school we have conversations like this quite openly. (Dr. Jones – Sociology)

While the Sociologists complained about the consumer trend, the English academic staff did not have opinions on this matter. However, one English lecturer put his assessment practices, which he perceived as effective in terms of pedagogy, above neoliberal policies. As such, for him, the school policy had to catch up to what he was doing instead:

> I don't pay much attention to the school policy. I mean I do in a sense that there they are, but I started marking since 1997, so I basically know how I mark and that's the way I mark. One of my areas is language testing anyway, so I always use the kind of methodologies that pedagogically sound. So, it's more like the school policy has been catching up with the applied linguistics in our school. All applied linguistics people have been quite aware of the assessment issues. I don't really know what to say, as I do what I do and I explain, and the rest of the school has been trying to catch up to that standard. (Prof. Davies – English)

In both schools, the lecturers talked about uncertainty, leaving things open, as well as providing students with opportunities to take risk and do something imaginative. This was contradictory to managerialism which was anti-risk and kept things in tight control:

> Because as with our discipline in the Arts, especially, it's not a specific formula that they can be used, so we can't tell students 'OK, if you do this and this and this, you *definitely* are going to get this marks, so it's general suggestions, so there's always a little bit of uncertainty there, but I think that can be quite productive, a productive uncertainty, and that's really where the students have a chance to bring their intelligence in place. (Dr. Grant – English)

At this point, one might argue that what the policy makers and central administrators at the University level and what the lecturers in the two departments were trying to do seemed to be at odds: the central administrators are trying instrumentally to assure quality and standards, whereas for these lecturers, education was not just about assuring that the criteria were met, and thus they were trying to teach and educate. Yet though they were not entirely in sympathy with the managers' neoliberal and human capital agenda, it had penetrated their everyday language.

5.2.4 Using the language of neoliberalism and a human capital agenda

Both Sociology and English lecturers used neoliberal language, such as 'We *sold* the ideas to colleagues', 'You have to *advertise* your assessment on the module catalogue'. Due to the influence of a neoliberal globalisation agenda, such a language became natural and normalised. Perhaps affected by the neoliberal agenda, the students also considered themselves as consumers who paid for education, and asked the lecturers to meet their demands. According to a Sociology student, 'We *pay* them more than 3,000 pounds for about four or five contact hours', and an English student, 'We *pay* them, so they should spend more time for us'. However, such language was just naturally used and it did not mean that they did not want an education because they really appreciated what they had learned. The influence of the neoliberalism, globalisation and human capital agenda could also be seen in the language of transferable skills for employability as the outputs of HE that these lecturers used when talking about how their assessment tasks prepared students for LLL, such as time management, working under pressure, team working, and so on. These issues will be analysed later in the next chapter.

5.3 Assessment changes driven by the NSS and departmental students' feedback

As part of the neoliberal agenda, the changes in assessment policy and practices in both departments were not only driven by the centre but also by the results of the National Student Survey (NSS) and departmental student feedback. In the University Newsletter in Spring 2010, although achieving an improvement since 2007, the MU's assessment and feedback was rated the lowest at 3.51 compared with other question areas in the NSS in 2009 (MU 2010b: 4). Thus, improving assessment and feedback has become an important goal for the University and was reflected at the two departments in the past few years. As stated in the *Sociology's Three Year Plan 2009/2010 – 2011/2012*:

> Responses to the NSS suggest that a significant number of undergraduate students are critical of the clarity and fairness of assessment, the promptness and comprehensive of feedback....The NSS results are unsatisfactory and the School is working to improve student satisfaction to benefit the overall student experience and the School's positioning in NSS rakings.
>
> (MU's Sociology Department 2009:1)

In addition to the NSS results, from module and programme evaluation, as well as Student-Staff Feedback Committee's meetings, students' comments on what needed to be changed were also taken into consideration. Among the most important comments were those about assessment and feedback, which made changes in assessment and feedback become one of the priorities in the two departments:

> Assessment has been moved up the agenda in the past couple of years from staff interests as well as NSS that push people to do it better... Well, we thought it was successful, but when we looked at the National Student Survey, the students weren't particularly happy with what was going on.... Assessment was one of the big issues on the last teaching away day where we come together and think about how to provide feedback, etc. (Dr. Fielding – Sociology)

> The school responds to the student survey....We look closely at the evaluation of modules and evaluation of the degree programmes, and we respond to those comments and points to development with students....We're governed by the student satisfaction and the school has to amend these policies accordingly. (Dr. Curtis –English)

Both departments focused on more communication about the marking criteria, giving more and better feedback to students, and encouraging them to get face-to-face feedback. All information about how students were assessed, how to get feedback, and marking criteria was available to students on the department's Intranet and in print forms, and that seemed to be clear and transparent to the students. Also, in the Sociology Module Evaluation Report or The English Module Feedback (MU's English Department 2010c), lecturers reflected on their modules and student's module evaluation, and on that basis they confirmed what needed to be changed in response to students' comments or explained what needs to stay the same. Recently, in both departments, students were required to submit their essay electronically through 'Turnitin' in order to detect plagiarism, and Web CT was used in teaching, learning and assessment, on which many lecturers put their teaching materials or readings, specimen papers for the assessment tasks, self-tests, and so on. Many students found it very useful:

> Almost everyone found the workshops and the exercises helpful in stimulating their own pieces, and found the workshop and assessment material available for students on WebCT helpful. (The English Module Feedback 2010 – *Creative Writing*)

Although these changes might also initiate from the lecturers' willingness to improve students' learning experience, the results from NSS and students' module feedback played the key role in pushing them. This showed that student voice was becoming more important in innovating assessment. Arguably, it could also be read as a part of the neoliberal agenda: students were consumers who paid for the education, and thus their demands had to be met. However, two Sociology lecturers – Dr. Fielding and Dr. Jones – expressed their concerns about the NSS. For them, other influential issues should also be considered in addition to the statistical numbers:

> A lot of us feel, at least I feel that there's a problem of taking things like that with too much face value because obviously the students complain. They complain about everything. Particularly they complain about feedback. And also when the time the NSS is always done, it's near the time of submitting their dissertation, so they are all very stressed and exhausted, so you have to take these things into account. I mean after all, we're sociologists; we're not going to take that kind of statistical stuff at face value. (Dr. Jones)

Essentially, Dr. Jones felt that it would be a 'danger' for HE to treat students as customers and 'spoon-feed' them in that way:

> Every year, there's a lot of pressure that we have to do more. But I think we always try to say: 'well, we have a lot of practice that have already in place and there's no end to doing more, and there's no end to giving more feedback, more assessment. I think there is a *danger*, but it's not particularly to our school or this university, but it's just the way how education is in Britain, if we do too much, you don't treat them as adult learners, you treat them as children because you're constantly spoon-feeding, you're constantly meeting every one of their demands, and there's no end of their demands, so where do you draw that line?

This again indicated lecturers' protests against the consumerist trend of HE and confirmed their educational viewpoints, which they attempted to operationalise in the two departments, even if constrained by the University climate.

5.4 Assessment methods in the two departments: the dominance of coursework

From the Module Catalogues 2009–2010, interviews, and focus groups, similarities and differences were found in the way the Sociology and English lecturers assessed their students. However, different from the past, coursework rather than exams was the dominant assessment method in both departments, which showed their emphasis on using coursework as formative assessment in order to improve student learning.

5.4.1 Assessment methods in the Sociology department

In the Sociology Module Catalogue, examinations combined with presentations were the dominant choice in the first year. Perhaps because first year was a big group of students (around 200), examinations could be the most suitable form. However, assessment in the second and third year was dominated by essays, and exams came second. Other assessments, such as case study and reflective journal, were also employed (see Table 5.1). In addition to these assessment methods, all final-year students of Sociology undergraduate programmes had to do a 12,000 word dissertation which was considered by most Sociology lecturers as very important and accounted for one third of the final year credits:

> [It's] very, very important as far as our school is concerned because it carries 40 credits, so as you know, for level 3, they study 120 credits, so one third of that is actually the dissertation. So, you know, they're very, very important. Because it's a year-long module, I will start preparing them for it in semester 2 of year 2. (Dr. Darcy)

Table 5.1 Assessment methods in the Sociology Module Catalogue 2009-2010

Level	Number of modules	Assessment methods				
		Exams	**Essays**	**Project s**	**Present a-tions**	**Others**
1	11	**8**	4	0	**7**	Practical: 1 (Social work)
2	28	7	**23**	3	1	Case study: 2 Reflective journal: 1 course
3	13	**7**	**12**	0	0	0
Total	52	22	**37**	3	8	

(MU's Sociology Department 2010b)

The dominance of essays was also found in the assessment practice of five interviewed Sociology lecturers, illustrated in Table 5.2. For Dr. Darcy, the reasons for the dominance of coursework, especially essays, could be partly because coursework allowed lecturers more flexibility in designing it, whereas for exam questions, they had to follow the rules. Also, both the lecturers and students had similar ideas that they did not like exams:

> You can imagine most of Sociology and Social Sciences tend towards very much on coursework; they don't like the formal examination. They basically thought that the easy way to do is just force the core modules to do it because if we gave them a choice, most people would not do the formal examination. (Dr. Fielding – Sociology)

> You get a number for exams, and you can't remember what you've written, you can't remember the questions. And you don't know what you're doing is right or wrong. (Daniel – Sociology student)

Table 5.2 Assessment methods used by the interviewed Sociology lecturers

Name and position	Typical courses taught	Level and number of credits	Assessment methods
1. Dr. Darcy (Director of Assessment)	Exploring Social and Cultural Life through Films	Level 2 – 10 credits	One 3000 word essay (100%)
2. Dr. Fielding (Chair of Teaching committee)	Social order: work, employment and Society	Level 3 – 20 credits	One 2-hour exam (50%) One 3,000 word essay (50%)
3. Dr. Bennett (Exam officer)	Understanding Contemporary Society	Level 1– full year – 30 credits	One 1,500 word essay (20%) One 3,000 word essay (40%) One 3,000 word essay (40%) One 1,500 word formative essay (0%)
4. Dr. Jones (lecturer)	Culture and power	Level 3 – 20 credits	One 2-hour exam (50%) One 3,000 word essay (50%)
5. Dr. Maguire (Undergrad. convenor)	Convenor of undergraduate courses		Talking about assessment in Social Work undergraduate courses in general

Among five modules in Table 5.2, there was no presentation. For most lecturers, presentations were difficult for mark moderation and organisation, and as such written forms of assessment was more favourable. As Dr. Darcy remarked:

> The more traditional ways of assessment facilitate mark-monitoring, for instance, in each of our module, except the dissertation is double marked, each of our module; in each of our modules, we construct a sample, which a mark monitor has to look at to comment on the overall standards of our marking, and so on. For group presentations, it'll be very difficult to do, for the mark –monitoring to take place after the event.

This also showed the influence of University quality assurance on the lecturers' assessment practices. Similar results could also be found in the English department.

5.4.2 Assessment methods in the English Department

The English Module Catalogue also suggested the dominance of exams in year one and of essays in year two and three. While presentations were mostly used in year-one Sociology modules, these appeared less in year-one English modules, and none in year two. However, it was used the most in year three, which was different from Sociology. One of the reasons could be due to the Drama modules which included performance. Nevertheless, presentations were also not as common as essays and exams. Perhaps one of the distinctive features of the English assessment methods was the use of online assessment, such as online exam and e-portfolio, in some modules, which was not found in Sociology (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Assessment methods in the English Module Catalogue 2009-2010

Level	**Number of modules**	**Assessment methods**				
		exams	**essays**	**projects**	**present -ations**	**others**
1	19	**10**	6	3	4	E-portfolio: 2 courses (learning blogs) Close-reading: 1 course Portfolio: 1 course (un-assessed) One online exam (out of these ten exams) through Web CT
2	13	4	**11**	1	**0**	Portfolio: 2 courses Close-reading: 2 courses Practical: participation in Applied Linguistics Research: 2 courses
3	41	12	**36**	5	**7**	E-portfolio: 2 courses (blogs, peer feedback) Practical: module performance outcome
Total	73	26	**53**	9	11	**E-portfolio: 4, close-reading: 3, practical: 3**

(MU's English Department 2010b)

Table 5.3 also showed that the majority of year-two courses included two assessment components: mostly one essay as a dominant component combined with different forms of assessment, such as one exam, close reading, portfolio or practical task. In year three, there was also a similar combination; however, about a quarter of the courses had two essays. The assessment methods employed by five interviewed lecturers also reflected these features. While the dissertation was a requirement for all Sociology students and an important assessed work leading to the determination of the degree, it was optional in English. Instead of giving students the freedom to choose not to do the dissertation, the English department made the decision for them. Dr. Grant noted that:

> We take the decision that the final year dissertation isn't a central component of the degree, so, it's optional...We think that the dissertation itself is a quite demanding piece of work. We make the students aware of what the requirements are for that, and we also have a very rigorous screening process. So generally students who are at average or below certain points will be advised not to take the dissertation module because we don't think that they will have a strong enough foundation to be able to deal with independent study.

Compared with the five Sociology lecturers, assessment done by their English peers seemed to be more varied, including assessed essays, formative essays, presentation and online portfolios (seminar templates, learning blogs, and peer feedback) (See Table 5.4).

While essays were helpful to student learning, if overused without other methods, it might make students stressful when they had to submit many essays at the same time:

In the second year, we had a terrific situation where at Easters we had about four or five essays due in the same day, and they were about 16 thousand words all together. Nightmare. (Jackie – English)

I met my tutor and he said: ‘Oh, how’s your other work going? Have you got any other essay?’ And I said: ‘Oh, yes, five.’ (Bridget – English)

Table 5.4 Assessment methods used by interviewed English lecturers

Name and position	**Typical courses taught**	**Level and number of credits**	**Assessment methods**
1. Dr. Grant (Director of Undergraduate Studies)	The Gothic Literature	Level 3 – 20 credits	• 1,000 word formative essay (0%) • Online portfolio (30%): 2 x 500-word learning blogs: 20% and 2x 250-word replies (peer feedback): 10% • One 3,500 word essay (70%)
2. Dr. Curtis (Director of Examinations)	Academic Community	Level 1 – Full year – 20 credits	• Eight learning blogs completed and posted on Web CT throughout the year (formative, 0%). •3,500 word essay: 70% (submitted at the end of Spring Semester) •presentation: 25% (at the end of Autumn semester)
3. Dr. Alconbury (lecturer)	Burning Desires: Vikings in Britain	Level 3 – 20 credits	• 3000 word essay (80%) •Assignment (20%): Portfolio of seven seminar templates, no longer than 500 words each, posted and reviewed on Web CT.
4. Dr. Firth (Lecturer)	Modern Irish Literature and Drama	Level 3 – 20 credits	One 15- minute individual presentation (40%) One 3,000 word essay (60%)
5. Prof. Davies (Lecturer)	Introduction to Language Teaching	Level 3 – 20 credits	One 1-hour exam (50%) One 4,000 word group project (50%)

That might be one of the reasons why all Sociology core courses had a combination between coursework and exam to reduce such unbalance:

We had quite a lot of formal examination in year one, but year two was heavily coursework. And a couple of years ago, that would seem not to test students in an appropriate way because it was so heavy to students in terms

> that they had to write so many words during a semester and also it opened to more plagiarism and so on. So we're kind of thinking about balancing that around. Pretty much all the core modules have the formal examination to try to balance between coursework and formal examination. (Dr. Fielding – Sociology)

In brief, the dominant assessment method in both English and Sociology was essays, combined with exams or other alternative assessment methods. However, the assessment practices at these departments were different in that English seemed to allow more flexibility in assessment, and thus there was more variety and innovation in their assessment methods. Presentations and online assessment (portfolios and learning blogs) were used more in English than Sociology. Meanwhile, assessment practices of five Sociology lecturers were only essays and exams. One of the reasons could be because the Sociologists were 'framed' by the policy of balancing 50-50 exam and essay in core modules, whereas this policy was unheard of in the interviews with the English lecturers. The following section will explore features of the marking process, including mark moderation and double marking, as well as marking criteria and guidelines and how they helped students to learn.

5.5 The marking process and student learning

The marking process in both departments was characterised by mark moderation, second marking, and marking scheme and criteria. For both senior managers and lecturers, it seemed to be clear, transparent, yet tightly managed. However, while senior managers considered its purpose as to ensure quality and standards for the University, most lecturers viewed it in terms of their communal or uniformed decisions that helped bring about more fairness to students to support their learning rather than quality assurance.

5.5.1 Mark moderation and double marking

As regulated in the MU's Quality Manual, all the marks leading to the decision of the Final Degree Classification must be moderated (the MU's Quality Manual 2009: 14). In English, all the work in the second year was moderated, and all the work in the third year was double-marked. Meanwhile, in Sociology, each of their modules was moderated, and the final year dissertation was double-marked. For the MU's senior managers, mark moderation tended to be mainly for quality assurance purposes:

> Schools have to have moderation policies in place. Normally, if a piece of work would have a direct impact on students' degree class, it would be double marked....It's really an assurance system, it's the quality and the standards, and the marking against the criteria and the award of marks, but from the students' point of view, it's also to assure that it isn't just one person see their work, that somebody else is looking at the marking. (The MU's Head of Assessment)

However, although the moderation was to ensure consistency and eliminate variation in marking, in contrast to senior managers' quality assurance purposes, most lecturers talked about the educational aims of this process. For them, it was not to control how they mark, but to discuss and come to a mutual agreement on the marks in order to ensure fairness for students:

> I actually think one of the *best* things in the British system is the policy to have double marking. Essentially, it's not a kind of control over people who can't do it, but it's a kind of you know how somebody is doing it, you have a communal decision. And the idea about externaling, it's so interesting. When you are an external examiner, it's so interesting to see how examples arrive at decisions....There never is ultimate fairness, but I think it's about as much fair as it gets. So it's quite a good thing. (Dr. Alconbury – English)

Dr. Jones (Sociology) viewed the process as opportunities to reflect and uniform her feedback and marking:

> External examiners have pointed out things like: your feedback is not uniform because what happens through a lot of schools is that some people give a lot of feedback, others just write a few sentences. So that's good because the moderation process, whether internal or external, is trying to make it more uniform.... Mostly I think through the moderation and the external examiners, you just…you realise you're doing the right thing in general when you see other people's feedback because as well as my mark will be moderated, I also moderate someone else's marks, you see. So I can also compare or contrast.

Likewise, Dr. Firth (English) believed that marking in humanity subjects tended to be more subjective, thus moderation and double marking was necessary to reduce subjectivity and improve uniformity, as well as to ensure that lecturers use the same standards and criteria. Although lecturers tried to minimise variation among different markers, for most students in the two departments, variation still existed not in the same modules but across modules:

> I find there's a lot of variation in the marking and the marking processes because when you handed in one essay with one structure, and you were told: that's brilliant, and then when you do exactly the same thing but with other lecturers, you'll get far less mark. I mean obviously it's individualistic for the people who run the modules, but that doesn't necessarily seem to be that much coherence between different modules, especially different years and different areas. (Una – Sociology)

Thus, they suggested more communication among lecturers who were teaching different modules in order to bring about more consistency across modules:

> I think that may help if there's a bit more communication between modules as well. I think the way *Language* was marked in first year was quite a lot harder than second year, and *Theories* was really hardly marked. (Bridget – English)

In brief, both departments applied mark moderation and double marking not only for quality assurance as required by the University, but also for the students in ensuring fairness and giving better feedback. In addition to marking moderation and double marking, marking criteria and guidelines were also used to inform and guide the students about how they were marked and how they could produce better pieces of work.

5.5.2 Marking criteria and guidelines in improving student learning

Both departments had general marking criteria which described in detail what the work in different ranges. However, there seemed to be more differences than similarities in the usage of marking criteria and guidelines in Sociology and English. The English department had three different specific sets of criteria for essays, presentations, and learning blogs published on the school Intranet and printed forms for the students. They were explained by Dr. Grant as:

> One of the reasons why we move away from just having just one standard set of criteria is that all different types of coursework have something that is more details specifically to be different, different modes of coursework, this might involve in keeping the criteria more or less the same, but making our seminar tutors and personal tutors aware of that, and students might need to be coaching in one particular area, so helping the students kind of match the special criteria on to their work.

Four English students had similar ideas that these criteria helped them to know the expectations, encouraging them to think and compare their work against them in order to improve. However, it depended on the modules that the marking guidelines and criteria were good or not. For most of them, Language modules were better because the guidelines seemed to be clear, while those in Literature tended to be vague:

> *The Language* is really good. I think that's the best one. Really straightforward, isn't it? We know exactly what we need to do. They give lots and lots of guidelines and exactly what books we can look for specific theories, areas of research. It's really well organized. (Molly)

> To be honest, I even don't like *Literature* any more. I hate it. I hate it. I just don't want to do it. I loved *Literature* and it was my strongest of the strand, and I can tell you how to write a good essay, but I can't stand back: 'I did this, this, and this'. But with *Language*, for instance, I can be like: 'Well, I did that because of that'. But with *Literature*, I just don't know. Whenever I get good marks on *Literature*, I just don't know how I did that. (Jenny)

Also, in some modules, students felt that they were not directed with the marking criteria, and as a result, they got lost:

> In *Stylistics*, the lecturer was so extremely vague about our last essay. I handed in and that could be 80 or 20, and I got no idea whether it was good or so. I don't really know what the marking criteria are at all, so I got no direction for my essay, the fact that 'Find any text you like about any subject you like', and I'm just like: 'What?' (Helen)

Meanwhile, in Sociology, apart from the general marking criteria on the students' undergraduate handbooks, there was no set of criteria for different types of written work like English. Instead, Dr. Darcy – Director of Assessment – designed and encouraged lecturers to use *The module-based generic feedback* which served as a guideline to inform students on what lecturers were looking for in each module specifically so that students could understand clearly what they should do to get better marks and what they should avoid. Dr. Darcy explained:

> The generic marking scheme in the student handbook is helpful, but generic. There might be more specific requirements that they have to meet. So I would actually do a few pages of feedback for the entire module, and say how many students in the previous cohort got a pass, a 2:1, and so on, and what are the topics that students have addressed and these are some of the characteristics of a good essay and of a weak essay for that particular topic. When the student receive the information, he or she will be able to place himself or herself within a broader context, so it's not only about how they have done within their essay, but how they have done in relation to other people in their class.

For Dr. Darcy, the guideline was useful although it would be difficult for module convenors in big team-taught modules because they had to synthesise all tutors' comments to construct this guideline. Three other Sociology lecturers also believed this guideline was essential to help students to come up with better pieces of work because it showed them exactly what to do. Thus, most Sociology students highly appreciated it. As Tom said:

> The best guidance we've got in terms of assessments is that some modules provide at the start the module-based generic feedback that they gave to the people who did the module the year before. That's sort of spelling out in very details so that we can see this wasn't not engaged with theories, we can see this didn't structure very well, blab blab blab. It's very instrumentally clear where people went wrong. So, people straight away have an idea of 'Well, that's obviously...if I avoid these things, our marks will be fairly well' and have that feeling of confidence.

However, in some modules, Sociology students were also puzzled about marking standards. Daniel noted that:

> One thing that struck us was during a Religion module last year, a group of us wrote essays. We all wrote them separately but we all checked each other's essay before handing them in, and everyone was really happy and had confidence that at least a handful of us would get first. Everyone was positive about the work that we'd done. And then we got the essays back and I think the highest anyone got was 68, but we all thought ours were actually good, not in terms of our confidence. And no one could get the mark on that kind of range, and we couldn't really understand why?

In spite of these concerns, the marking process in both departments seemed to be transparent and consistent with marking criteria, guidelines, moderation and double marking. However, for Professor Davies, the marks were more beneficial for the school than for students:

> To be honest, the only reason we assess the students is that the university and the school require us to give them marks. Many students learn because they want to learn and they're interested, but the school makes a requirement: you have to give a number for each module, so pedagogically I'm not sure that makes a difference: Have you learn more if you've got a 60 or 55? Maybe the person with a 55 actually learns more, but her writing is not that strong. Maybe the person with a 60 did learn more. A person

> with a 70 may learn a lot and put a lot of effort into it, but it also means she has good writing skills, good organisation skills.

In the lecturers' educational viewpoint, what really helped students to learn was formative feedback rather than summative assessment. Prof. Davies said:

> In most cases, I'm not sure the assessment is really required for learning. It is just something that the school forces the students to do. The feedback is what important for students. It's not the number on. The assignments and the feedback it gives, the engagement it gives with your lecturer enforces your learning. I think you learn more by sitting down and having a talk with your lecturer than you do by giving a number on essay. So you know, I think assessment in most cases is not for the student, it's for the school.

In brief, marking criteria and guidelines at the two departments were different: English used three sets of marking criteria for different assessment methods, whereas Sociology just had the general marking criteria. However, the Sociologists applied *The module-based generic feedback* as a useful guideline for students in doing their assignments. In both departments, students had similar ideas about the marking that it rather depended on the modules. Thus, they showed both appreciation and complaints about the marking in some modules.

5.6 Constraints that hinder alternative assessment

Most English and Sociology lecturers had a similar opinion that student numbers, lack of time and support were the key constraints that might hinder alternative assessments or make it more difficult for lecturers in the assessment process. As the student numbers were increasing, the lack of time might cause problems to double marking:

> There's always a balance as well between the amount of time that we can reasonably invest in the marking process as well, as we take on more students, so time constraint becomes more difficult to do the double marking. (Dr. Grant – English)

Some lecturers would like to try alternative assessment methods; however, they could not do it due to time limitation. According to Dr. Darcy (Sociology), he wanted to try oral examination or group presentation in '*Exploring Social and Cultural Life through Films*', but he could not because this module was very short:

> I can choose to assess the students verbally, orally, like a lot of lecturers in Belgium or in France still you actually got to see the professor, you have an oral exam for 15 minutes. Now it takes a lot of time to do that. Here, it's 10 weeks, very short. And within that, the contact hours for a 10 credit modules are 15 hours only. I've actually given my students 16 hours. So I do eight two-hour sessions. But even then, it's very short, you know. So, I have to think of a way of assessing them, but I think group presentation could be a good way forward, not without these challenges.

Dr. Alconbury (English) also wished to have more time and fewer students to give more assignments and feedback in order to support their learning:

> In an ideal world, I would like to keep a variety of things but have more time and really fewer students because I think it works and I think it worthwhile, but I just think that it's not very much appreciated, you know, the time that you need to spend on it. More time *and* time to talk to students about effective feedback, how to get the best of it, how to do things, how to go about it, to assist them in their learning, to see this is a process. It's not just about *me* passing some kind of judgement, but how students use that judgement in order to move forward and to get better.

She strongly protested the idea of increasing student numbers as a trend in HE whereas lecturers did not have enough time for them, which is another aspect of managerialism affecting their teaching lives:

> I think this is one of the things that most people don't acknowledge: the increase of HE actually makes it legitimate for students. And there's not a lot more we can do because there are so many hours in the day, and we feel we do awfully a lot, and we get tired. We'll really get tired at some stage, and there's a point when we can't give it anymore. And unfortunately many of these people seem to be in the Teaching and Learning strategies of the university or just kind of seem to think: 'Well, another 200 may not make *any* difference'. *It makes a very big difference*.

Therefore, in order to apply a new assessment method, lecturers had to consider many related factors, not only time and student numbers but also support from the department:

> If you choose an assessment method, it is very labour-intensive; you have to ensure that you get the support you need in terms of time, to be able to do that in terms of teaching assistant, you have to ensure that there's a supportive infrastructure there. (Dr. Darcy)

Although there were some constraints in time and student number, most lecturers in both departments believed that the assessment regime seemed to be effective in supporting student learning:

> I think here it's great that it's very personalised. I mean I was really surprised the first time I saw it. We have exam board at the end of the year where we truly look at every student. It's amazing. Every student if they have any extenuating circumstances, any personal issues, all of that is taken into consideration in making a judgement about what they're going to graduate with. And I think all of that is great. It's really good practice. (Dr. Jones)

In brief, for both English and Sociology lecturers, constraints in time and student numbers were factors that they needed to consider in choosing assessment methods. This might prevent them from applying alternative assessment practices or give more feedback to students. The next section will be about professional development (PD) in the two departments.

5.7 Professional development (PD)

Professional development in the two departments was similar with two types of training: formal training at the university level and informal training at the departmental level. Accordingly, postgraduate tutors and new lecturers in English and Sociology were required to do the Postgraduate Certificate in HE (PGCHE) and they could take PD courses provided by the Staff and

Educational Developmental Unit (SEDU). In addition, they received informal training through being mentored or talking to senior or more experienced staff within their department. About PD programmes, the MU's Head of Assessment believed they might be effective:

> I would say, I guess, yes, because if they weren't effective, then we would have problems with our academic staff. We would have students' complaints, you know, there would be students' not getting very good degrees. The external examiners are not commenting that there's a problem. If they thought there was a problem with the teaching and learning in a particular module, they would raise that in their annual report. You know, the University's quality audit will pick up that sort of thing as well, the school review will pick up that sort of things, so yes, it's an effective programme for new lecturers.

Again, the MU's Head of Assessment talked about PD in managerial terms with nothing about the PD benefits for the lecturers. As a new lecturer who had just been teaching for three years, when taking these PD courses, Dr. Jones (Sociology) felt that they tended to be general for all subject disciplines and bureaucratic in asking lecturers to do assignments, whereas they were too busy to do so:

> You know, the university ran workshops and courses, so you can do something, but to be honest, most of us do not have the time, and I think a lot of us believe that those are skills that you can acquire on the job, like the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE), we are put in a room with engineers and scientists. Because it's not discipline specific, the people who deliver these courses often speak in a very general way, so it's not very useful. And often at university level, the way they do it very bureaucratic. Because we have to submit some assignments for this course and stuff, so it feels more like one more thing that you have to do rather than having a quick word with someone or looking at their feedback and comparing.

Thus, she felt that it was more useful to learn from peer-review, teaching-away day, and informal talks with people in the department or meetings with module convenors:

> I'd rather have in-house peer-review and training and sharing within the school. I find it really useful with the teaching- away day that we have, or talking with colleagues because sometimes when talking to others, you

> realised that it's a common problem, so the problems you are facing are not just your own. And also like in the year-one course that I've told you about, that's team-taught, so now we have to do the marking, but the convenor, he's very conscientious, he actually goes through almost all our scripts, and we have a meeting before we give them to the students, and again that's really good because we meet and we kind of reflect on.

For her, the departmental culture was very supportive, and she could always ask and learn from senior colleagues' good practices:

> I think it's our particular department culture. Ours is very open and friendly. I can go up to the Director of Assessment any time and say: you know I'm not really sure if my feedback is OK or if this mark is OK, or I can go to a convenor someone I'm co-teaching with. So I think that really helps for people like me in particular who are just starting teaching because you can always ask other people and they'll be able to tell you whether you are on the right track or not.... I think it's always good to speak to a more experienced colleague because formal guidelines are just guidelines, and you know it's really help to talk to other people and get a sense of their own… a sense of good practice and then to employ that.

Dr. Darcy (Sociology) also believed what could help new lecturers were informal conversations about the designing of the modules and things they needed to follow, as well as meetings to moderate the exam papers and essays:

> They've been in informal conversations to pick up some ideas or some tips of how to do it...I chair those meetings when we moderate the exam papers to ensure that there are standardisation. They are for moderation purposes, but there are conversations 'behind the scene', so as to speak, to enable new colleagues particularly, to be able to understand the conventions and to be able to design the assessment based on that. And we do the same with essays as well. So, it's not a kind of specific training but there are mechanisms to ensure that conventions are followed and that support is provided, particularly they are new modules, as sometimes, the colleagues aren't clear about what to do. So we do help them out in that way.

Similarly, in English, for Dr. Grant, postgraduate tutors were mentored by their module convenors in assessment, especially in the marking process:

> Individual tutors will get guidance from the module convenors, so we make sure that our module convenors are giving them the correct coaching in terms of how they should be assessing, which are the range they should be marking at, where it's required. A postgraduate tutor may have the entire of their assessed work double-marked by the module convenor and a member staff, and then that member staff will go through and talk through the rationale for the marking.

Annual training seminars were also made by module convenors for postgraduate tutors on marking when necessary; however, this form of training did not happen frequently and for every module:

> The other thing that tends to happen occasionally on an annual basis is running a training seminar, that's module specific, so if the module convenors feel that it'll be helpful, they will run a session for our postgraduate tutors on the module where you'll look at sample work and grading and talk to the rationale behind that. It doesn't happen for every module, but just where the module convenors feel that it's important. (Dr. Grant)

To sum up, although there were PD courses provided at the university level, for the staff in both English and Sociology, 'on-the-job' training through mentoring, academic meetings and talks with colleagues seemed to be a helpful and effective way to support new lecturers and postgraduate tutors.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the key assessment features of the Sociology and English departments of the MU. In general, the University assessment regime was well organised and effectively operated, yet at the same time was tightly managed and controlled. There was a tension between the University's policy and senior managers with a neoliberal reductionist perspective focusing more on compliance with quality assurance, and lecturers' educational approach on using assessment to teach and educate students. Although the Sociology and English lecturers used neoliberal language to talk about the assessment process and conformed to the neoliberal policies in terms of marking and quality assurance, they tended to use these policies to support student learning and their assessment practices emphasised intrinsic rather than instrumental learning.

Assessment in both departments shared significant similarities in key assessment features. The assessment regimes were dominated by coursework, especially essays. Changes in assessment policy and practices were driven by the NSS and student feedback in module evaluations or staff-student meetings. Due to students' dissatisfaction in assessment and feedback in the NSS in recent years, both departments focused on changes in feedback, marking criteria and provided students with more assessment guidelines than previously to support them for better understanding and improving their work. In terms of PD, informal PD training at the departmental level was perceived to be helpful for new lecturers. Less helpful were University courses which seemed to be more about control and less about development. There were still constraints, mainly in time and student numbers, which made it difficult for lecturers to apply innovative practices in assessment. Both Sociology and English students had similar views and experience on assessment: there were variations in marking and feedback among lecturers, and they appreciated some and complained about others. Apart from these key similarities, there were also a few minor differences in assessment practices in these two departments. English had more alternative assessment methods, especially online assessment, and more various sets of marking criteria than Sociology. Nonetheless, Sociology tended to balance essays and examinations in core modules and applied *The module-based generic feedback* as helpful guidelines for students when doing assignments in a module. Also, in

Sociology, the final-year dissertation was a compulsory and important piece of work, whereas in English it was optional and not that important.

With the above-mentioned features, this chapter has provided a holistic picture of assessment in the two departments which serves as the background for the operationalisation of Boud’s framework in the MU case in chapter six.

6 Chapter six: Operationalising Boud's framework for the Midlands University

6.1 Introduction

In chapter five, key assessment features of the MU's Sociology and English departments were characterised, and among them were the dominance of essays and the focus on feedback to improve student learning. This chapter will now explore to what extent the eight elements of Boud's framework of *Sustainable Assessment – (i) engaging students; (ii) authentic activities; (iii) students design assessment; (iv) integrative activities; (v) learning and judgement; (vi) modelling and practice; (vii) working with peers;* and *(viii) giving and receiving feedback* – are present in the assessment policies, perspectives and practices of both departments and how they helped improve student learning and foster LLL. In the analysis, the four elements – *(i) engaging students,(ii) authentic activities, (iii) students designing assessment, (vii) working with peers* – will be merged into '*engaging students: assessment design and group work*' due to their relations to each other in the data. I will argue that most of the elements in Boud's framework of *sustainable assessment* can be seen as being effectively applied in practice. Even though not all lecturers in the study use alternative assessment methods, their assessment to some extent seems to support learning both at and beyond university.

6.2 Engaging students: assessment design and group work

Most English and Sociology lecturers had similar ways in encouraging students' engagement through giving them the freedom to choose their own assessment topics, authentic activities and group presentations or projects. Evidence was also found that students could improve their learning because they felt these assessment tasks engaging and interesting.

6.2.1 Engaging students through their own choice of assessment topics and authentic activities

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, essays were the dominant assessment method; however, almost all the lecturers in the study did not use the traditional type of essay – giving students an essay title to write about it. Instead, they let students have the freedom to choose the topic within the subject discipline or any relevant topic and negotiate it with them. They either offered students guidelines or encouraged students to come and see them to make sure that these students were on the right track. In *Gothic Literature*, Dr. Grant (English) asked students to select one or two texts by themselves and analyse them in their essay. For him, it was not only a chance for them to engage but also to take a risk and be creative:

> I really want to give the students an opportunity to explore their own interest and also to demonstrate that they're engaging with the text. They come up with their own topics and they have to approve their topic with me, so I can make sure that it's appropriate, but it gives them a lot more freedom to spot out their interest. But that in itself is a test I'm seeing what they can do and seeing how creative they can be in choosing their topics and that sort of things. So, give students a chance to be a lot more adventurous, but also teach them how to be adventurous in a very disciplined sort of ways.

Similarly, Dr. Darcy (Sociology) required students to choose their own topic and some related images in order to construct a story in *Belief, Spirituality and Religion*, and in *Exploring Social and Cultural Life through Films*, they selected a film, linked it to a theme and wrote a 3,000 word essay. In both modules, he wanted students to be able to draw on both academic and non-academic materials. His assessments engaged the students not only because students had the freedom to select the topics they enjoyed, but also because they were related to real life, such as religion and young people, religion and sexuality, human right, gender, and so on. For him, students really liked the assessment, engaged and learned more as a result:

> I think they like the approach because they feel that they are much more involved in shaping the assessment. They like the fact that they get the chance to decide what title the essay should be opted to and they can choose those images themselves and construct a story out of it themselves. They also have a chance to come to see me to talk to me about it. So, it's a much more, I would like to think, engaging way of doing an essay rather than being given a title to do it. It takes more time, I have to say, but I think they find it's much more engaging, more satisfactory. So I hope that enhances their learning experience in terms of having more to say what they want to do within reasons.

Similarly, in Dr. Jones's module '*Culture and Power*', students applied sociological theories to analyse a real-life case study of their choice. She believed this motivated them because when they analysed an authentic social issue, using theoretical concepts in the module, they could link their readings with the real world. This provided them with a different learning experience:

> I think it adds something different to the learning process which is not just about collecting materials and summarising it and putting that together, but using certain concepts to analyse everyday life, which is part of their training as sociologists, they should be able to use sociological theories to understand the world around them...The point is they take something ordinary but to look at it sociologically and this is what we partly do right from year one; you know, it's always about engaging them with the work from a sociological perspectives.

Therefore, giving more space for students' self-determination of what to do and providing authentic assessment tasks could make students more engaged, which might result in students' improvement of their performance. As Dr. Jones remarked:

> If they do start to appreciate what they're learning, then they'll do better because then they're doing it because they enjoy doing it. Often I had the students come and say: I really enjoy the topic, and I'm going to do my essay on this, or whatever. And often people who never attend it, or people who just can't be bothered, but it's nothing really grabbing them. So you have to be aware of 'luring' them in (laugh), and I think this will make an impact on how they perform.

It seemed that these lecturers were successful, as most students had similar opinions; they became more engaged when doing authentic assessment activities, and this really 'made a difference' to their learning:

> Last year, we had two essays where we had the basic around three or five images, and discuss the context of …one module about religion, and one about Social aspect of culture. And rather than just write 3000 words block of text, it was broken into images which we brought into the discussion, which makes a difference in our writing process and we feel a bit more involved. It's more than just an engagement with theories along a body of text alone. It makes you more engaged with social reality. (Mark–Sociology)

Likewise, most English students liked doing their assessment that way, although they sometimes found it challenging to look for the topics themselves:

> In *Investigating the English Language* last year, we had to find a text. Sometimes it's hard because you've got to go away and find something, but it's nice that you can write something that you enjoy. (Helen – English)

In brief, lecturers got students engaged in the assessment process through authentic and self-selected topics, and group work, and students seemed to appreciate these methods. Nonetheless, there were divergent opinions about students' being engaged and disengaged in group work from both lecturers and students.

6.2.2 Students' engagement versus disengagement in group work

Professor Davies (English) gave students a practical assessment task in his module '*Introduction to Language Teaching'*. It was not an essay but a group project to create classroom materials which students could use if they worked as teachers in future. They could also make their own decisions about what they were going to do. In this task, students were engaged and learned more through interaction with their group members. As he explained:

> There's a lot of engagement in the groups because by and large I find the groups get into their study, coach each other forward, and each individual student does end up doing more work and becoming more interested. When you're just talking to other people about ideas, you're more motivated, but also you learn, and there's an exchange of ideas. And I think that part is the best part of learning. Whereas when you study by yourself, you typically just go to the library, don't you? It's just an isolated individual activity which has a lot of value, but I do think in a study group talking about these ideas is a good thing. So it's one way of increasing the engagement, increasing the time, increasing the interaction when you cover the materials by using group projects.

For these reasons, he believed that group projects were a good assessment method if students got on well with each other, as it was evident that most of his students enjoyed doing this project and produced very good pieces of work:

> So most students seem to be…except one group they can't function together, they like the module; they like the assessment. A lot of people come up and say they really enjoy it. So as long as you can make sure the group function together, then I think it's quite a good way to assess the module like that.

Four English students also agreed that group work was good in language modules and informal seminars and important in developing team-working skills. Also, all Sociology students believed that group work helped them to learn from other people's ideas and experience, as well as to know how to interact with other people:

> I think group work is quite important because you have to know how to deal with other people at some point or another. And it helps you to actually learn from other people's experience. It's also useful to build up your team-working skills (Daniel – Sociology)
> I do think it's quite important, I hope because it's like more practical with group work. It's not going to be like: so it's all about me, you do it yourself. (Molly –English)

Similarly, most Sociology students also had some good experience about group work. For example, they did a group research project on housing in the area and had a presentation in class about it, which they found interesting because it was authentic:

> We did a module on researching culture, and the assessment is a group project which solves a social issue or problem. And then we went around [the Midlands] and looked at different housing, and that was really interesting because you have to produce your own images in contact with them, then we did a presentation on that in class. And that's really good. (Mark)

Although most Sociology and English students recognised its importance, they believed that group work was only effective when all members were engaged and worked well with each other. However, they also complained about other group members' disengagement with the tasks:

> I think group work is really good if things go well. We had a group project last year on a research method module. We ended up two of us working hard for the other two who didn't do much. I don't know. I think it's a good form of assessment that the university is very keen on because being able to work with others is like a multiple skill, but I don't know how often group work is actually group work . (Mark – Sociology)

Unfairness also happened when some people who had better public speaking skills had to do the presentation for other people who did not have that confidence. Also, students were disengaged when group members could not get along well with each other, and this challenged the idea that group work helped developing team-working skills for students. As Molly (English) noted:

> People talk about interpersonal skills and team-work skills in group work, but I think it's a bit of a problem because I know people who have been in group and they just can't work along with, and there isn't one person to diffuse the situation, like: guys, calm down. I think it can be a problem if you don't get along and it can affect your work. But I haven't got that problem not because I have amazing interpersonal skills but because I've been with people I like.

Perhaps because of these problems, group work was not commonly used as an assessment task by the ten lecturers of the two departments participated in the interviews: only Prof. Davies used a group project as one of the two assessment components. Like the students, Dr. Darcy was also concerned about these problems of group work. For him, it was important that any assessment task should ensure fairness and equality for students:

> For group presentations, you are bound to find student group members who contribute to different levels, some are very committed, and some have just been *'a parasite'*, so as to speak. So, if you give all of them equal marks, it's unfair, anyway. So I have to think of a way of doing it. So, these are some of the practical issues. Because you can't just say 'oh, wow, that is a creative assessment method', you have to ensure that the implementation of the assessment methods does *not* generate any unfairness or inequality, you know, because to me, that is very important.

To sum up, there was strong evidence that most lecturers in both departments could effectively get students more engaged and do better by allowing them to take part in the process of designing the assessment activities through their own choice of the topics and by authentic assessment activities. However, opinions on the level of students' engagement or disengagement tended to be varied, particularly in the group tasks which supported the production of assessed work. Moreover, it is important that students should be engaged not only for assessment but also for the sake of learning through the alignment of assessment, teaching, and learning activities. If their engagement was only for assessment, this could be led to instrumental learning. As Dr. Jones stated:

> I'm a little weary of linking everything into assignment or exams because they tend to be too instrumental, you know, like, well, we only do it because it's for the exams because otherwise, they're not interested, they don't engage with it. So there have to be a way of making them engaged with the course materials, but not only with the view of doing well in terms of exams or essays, you know. Because they have a lot of choices in their exams: there are 10 questions, which they have to do just two.

The next section will explore another key element of Boud's framework – *integrative activities* – in order to find out whether and to what extent the assessment activities are linked with each other within and across modules, as well as with the learning outcomes of the whole programme in both departments.

6.3 Integrative activities

In the Sociology and English *Module Catalogues* 2009–2010, the learning outcomes of the whole programme and each module were transparently described and classified into four different types: *knowledge and understanding*, *intellectual skills*, *professional skills*, and *transferable skills*. They could be achieved through assessment and different teaching and learning activities, such as seminars, workshops, practical tasks, and tutorials. In general, the language of skills was used in the description, and apart from the differences on knowledge and skills required by their own subject disciplines, both departments shared similar key outcomes, such as providing students with critical thinking and analysis, reflexivity and creativity, communication, time management skills, and so on. Dr. Darcy explained:

> The assessment regime that we design has to reflect the learning outcomes. Of course in designing a programme, you have to have the curriculum map in relation to assessment that will help you, say, OK , in this particular module, we are going to assess the students in this way in order to help them to meet the learning outcomes of this type, of that type…. So, when you put a whole programme together, the module needs to speak to, its assessment needs to be related to some of the learning outcomes of the programme. And collectively, all the modules in the programme have to be able to cover all the learning outcomes.

For most English and Sociology lecturers, their assessment tasks were closely linked with each other and aimed at assessing the learning outcomes of the module and some in the programme. Take, for example, in *Understanding Contemporary Society* – a level one full-year module convened by Dr. Bennett (Sociology), the four essays were not only closely connected in order to train students how to write an essay, but were also integrated with other assessment tasks in the whole programme:

> This is a module that trains them to work within our discipline. It's like the learning curve, if you like, coming out of the A level, and access courses into studying Sociology, Sociology and Social and Culture study, to work at university level. We need to work closely with them and train them to actually write an essay. This is building up to whenever they come in year 2 or 3 where there are quite a lot of their assessments by coursework in this school. But it also provide a balance because we do quite a lot of examination as assessment in year one.

The link among different components of assessment was also seen in Dr. Grant's *The Gothic Literature* that required students to write a 1,000 word formative draft essay. They then posted it on Web CT to get feedback from their peers and tutors in order to revise and work up to the main 3,500 word essay. They also submitted two learning blogs (500 words/each) which, for Dr. Grant, gave students a chance to integrate things they learned in the module with the world outside:

> This is a chance for our students to reflect on their own reading of a text, or reading whatever materials assigned for them to read coupled with the discussion going on in seminars or classroom teaching, but then using it, reflecting on it and integrating it with something outside of the module. So give them a chance of being a little more creative, but also try to promote integrative learning and we develop our learning blogs in quite close discussions with the University Centre for Integrative Learning, so we're trying to get students making more connections between what they're doing in class and the wider community and a kind of wider lifestyles.

Therefore, it could be concluded that most assessment activities carried out by these Sociology and English lecturers seemed to be closely integrated with each other within the module and with those in the other modules and the learning outcomes of the whole programme. The next section will explore another key element of Boud's framework – *Modelling and practice*.

6.4 Modelling and practice

Aiming at students' better understanding and more improvement, some English lecturers provided online practice tests, specimen papers, and guidance and responses to common questions and issues raised by the students in the modules through Web CT:

> In *Medieval Englishes*, where there are big chunks of information and knowledge the students need to become familiar with (e.g. old English grammar), we have introduced a range of self-assessment quizzes that the students can work through outside class and of the availability of a specimen paper for this assessment on Web CT. (Dr. Alconbury – English)

However, as found in *The English Module Feedback 2010*, English lecturers might have different ideas on providing students with exemplars of exam papers or essays. Some agreed to give students more materials and guidance:

> 'More things posted on WebCT'. I'm aware that this facility was under-used this year. I'll try and encourage next year's module team to provide more material. (*The 20th Century – Forms in Transition*)

Others refused to do so for fear that it would encourage students to learn only for the test:

> Most of you want to see sample exam papers a long time in advance, so that you can tailor your learning through the module to the type of knowledge that will be tested in the exam (in practice I suspect this often means second guessing how much reading of primary material you really need to do). While I suppose there is an element of understandable pragmatism about this way of working, I'd like to think that studying nineteenth-century literature is not just about exams! (*Long 19th Century*)

In Sociology, Dr. Darcy gave students two first class essays from the previous cohort as exemplars for them to aim at:

> My students I am teaching now on *Belief, Spirituality and Religion*, when we start the module, I also make available to them the generic feedback from last year. So they have a chance to look at it and discuss that within seminars and I also make available to them, with the consent of students concerned, two first class essays from last year, which are anonymous, of course because I want them to see what a first class essay looks like, so hopefully they were inspired to produce the same kind of essay.

Most students also found it useful to have these exemplars because they could know exactly what they needed to do to have a good essay:

> They did give us two pieces of work that students did last year, an essay that got first, an essay that got a low 2:2. It was quite useful, you know, the one who got first; I know exactly what kind of form I need to follow. Certainly, if they gave you examples of students' pieces of work, you'd know how to it, so that was quite useful. (Mark – Sociology)

While recognising that they had a lot of detailed guidance and feedback for essays, three Sociology students also complained about not having practical sources of guidance for exam questions, and those they had received were not very helpful. As Mark said:

> I think it's strange in a way the school provides so much feedback on essays and essay structure from the first years onwards, while we don't really have that with the exams at all. The university also runs exam skills workshops, but still themselves don't really seem to offer any guidance on what really makes a good exam answer. The only thing they really say is take some time to plan it from the start and structure it with the introduction, body, and conclusion. They don't normally talk about what makes a good exam answer.

In brief, the extent of giving students models and practice seemed to be varied and dependent on each lecturer, and students tended to require more guidance and exemplars on exam questions. In the next section, how assessment supports student learning and develops their ability of making judgement, as well as what lecturers want their students to be will be discussed.

6.5 Learning and judgement

All ten lecturers in the two departments had similar ideas on what they wanted their students to be. They were keen on developing students' skills to become critical and creative thinkers, independent, reflexive learners, as well as equipping them with transferable skills to prepare them for their future.

6.5.1 Becoming critical and creative thinkers

Becoming critical and creative thinkers was considered one of the most important skills that both departments focused on. In Sociology, students were provided with opportunities to form and practise making critical judgement in different contexts. Thus, for Dr. Darcy, assessment played the role of not only assessing but also supporting students to develop these capacities:

> The broad teaching and learning aim of our school is to produce critical students who engage with the study and are able to practise the skills in different contexts, being knowledgeable and able to produce things about social work, social policy and so on. And I think the assessments do contribute to that in the sense that through the assessment we were able to identify, not only to assess, to differentiate the abilities of the students in practicing those skills, but also in terms of identifying students who have not developed those skills more fully at a particular stage, and try to encourage them, try to provide them with support so that they become more competent in practicing those skills.

This aim was obviously seen through different assessment tasks of most Sociology lecturers. Dr. Bennett explained why one of the four essays in the first year module *Understanding Contemporary Society* was a critical review of a journal articles:

> We choose to ask them write a critical review of a journal article because it is one part of our study skill training. We're training them to read critically in order to accept the fact that when they come in to study at university level, they will read a wide range of materials and it's teaching them how you unpack what a piece of writing is trying to tell you, the skill for doing that, the different things to look at in a piece of writing. And we're trying to show them in this module that we're training them to think, we're training them to challenge , training them to analyse, and to understand what makes a piece of academic work, why is it really robust, you know. And it's not that somebody talking over the top of their head.

Similarly, Dr. Jones's case study in *Culture and Power* was a helpful task for students to build up criticality and creativity and practise the ability for making thoughtful judgement to prepare them for their future work and lives:

> It gives them an opportunity to be imaginative, creative, critical, and treat them as they're knowledge producers. The degree programme as a whole… this is a very discipline specific in Sociology, we focus on preparing them to be critical engagers with the world as such. Presumably, even after this they'll go to different careers and occupations as they wish, but they will be able to read an article and not take it as face value, a lot of training here is for them to be able to think of facts as not just facts but facts that have been mediated by representation, or ideology, power, etc…. I suppose we hope that when they graduate, they would bring that critical faculty to whatever they do.

In addition, Sociology offered a 10 credit full-year core module on *Critical Analysis* in order to train students on critical analysis and research skills towards the dissertation.

The English lecturers also focused on developing criticality and creativity in their assessment practices. Dr. Curtis believed that these capacities were the key areas in English Studies: 'Certainly with a degree in English Studies, one with a critical mind, one develops and becomes a first-class communicator, one who is able to drop on creative and analytical faculties', and could be effectively built through essay writing:

> The emphasis of course in the school of English is pretty much on written compositions, the ability to inform, describe and persuade, to synthesise a range of ideas to pour the path through very different theories, to generate a coherent, convincing, critical argument, to form their own line of argument, and to show analytical sensitivity and to be able to communicate that, to build a question, to look beneath the surface and to be able to communicate that in a very clear, limpid way.

Due to these emphases, in *Gothic Literature*, Dr. Grant assessed these capacities in the learning blogs:

> What I'm testing there is their ability to read as well as literary critique and their ability to analyse the text and draw as appropriate on very specific context…. test what they can do and how creative they can be…One of the things that the English Studies degree does quite highly is creativity, and the ability to think by themselves. So the introduction of the learning blogs is a way of assessing students in different ways than in a possible, more standard academic essay.

These were also what Dr. Firth aimed at in *Creative Writing* in which he asked students to construct a portfolio with two pieces: one critical and one creative. He maintained that criticality and creativity accompanied and reinforced each other. These capacities were developed not only for learning but also for employability. As Dr. Firth (English) explained:

> Written thing, like essays, is about communication skills, isn't it? There is also critical thinking in that expanded sense, not just the nitty-gritty of critical theory, but that ability to paraphrase an argument and potentially identify its weaknesses, to set different critical perspectives in dialogue with each other; that can be very useful as well. For example, in going into law, civil service, medical professions, working as a PA, or simply being involved in discussions. All of these jobs call for very highly-developed communication skills....

In line with the lecturers' commitment, most students in both Sociology and English believed that essays help them improve their learning and develop critical thinking. For most English students, through writing essays, they knew how to use the information, structure their argument, think critically, and get feedback from their lecturers to improve their writing skills and styles. Most Sociology students also had similar opinions with Tom that: 'with essays, you need to do get really in-depth discussions, structure more work and research through specific, pointed readings, and you have to be concise and think critically'.

In brief, becoming critical and creative thinkers was among important capabilities that most Sociology and English lecturers wanted their students to possess not only for their present learning but also for their future work and lives. They mainly used essays as the major assessment method in order to support students to form these capabilities, and that was highly appreciated by students.

6.5.2 Forming reflexive learners

There seemed to be more evidence of reflexive assessment practices in English than Sociology. Dr. Firth asked students to write a self-reflective piece of work coupled with the main creative writing assignment:

> They will provide a piece of writing about what they have done in a creative piece as self-reflection: How I compose this work, how do I think it works, what kinds of ideas I have tried on, what kind of influences have shaped my writing. That creative exercise plus a more critical self-reflection work quite well.

In Drama modules, students were often asked to write a reflective piece submitted after their presentation as an explanation for what they had done, which might help review their performance. As Dr. Grant remarked:

> In modules looking at dramatic text, there's often presentation where students have to act on a performance. They are not assessed on their acting ability because it's not a drama school, we're not teaching people how to

> act, but they will be assessed on the decision they make as directors, and usually these are followed by a reflective piece, explain why they decide to do things in a particular way, so what we're testing there is students' understanding of the way in which performance moves from printing version to a stage version.

Three of the English students also considered these reflective tasks helpful because they could make judgement on their own performance and think about what they needed to improve. Jackie said:

> I had an evaluative essay that I had to do for my 20th century play presentation, and I found it really useful, actually because there were so many things that I thought, after I had done it, I thought: OK. That wasn't great and, just handing that in and being able to say 'I don't think it's good, but on reflection, I could have done this to make it better, maybe I could have include this, I wanted to include this but I didn't have enough time.' And from the class, we had the feedback sheets that we could use and we had to hand them in to show that you used that for evaluation. I thought that it was pretty good because it helps me to improve the next presentation.

Meanwhile, the Sociology lecturers did not use any reflective assessment tasks. Perhaps due to constraints, they had to give the priority to the one that they believed the most important. Dr. Fielding stated:

> If I had a choice and a lot of help with my teaching, so it wasn't a problem with marking a hundred of students. Because that's semester two of the third year, we haven't really had time to turn round and so if I didn't have to turn things around in minutes, I'd let students do a reflective piece of work because I thought sociology work has many different formats, and the way I kind of like to do it is a combination of assessment to do some form of set questions to make sure that they get all the theory results.

Thus, reflexivity seemed to be emphasised more in English than Sociology; however, in both departments it was a weaker focus, compared with criticality and creativity. There were just a few reflexive assessment practices and only one peer-feedback task. Although students could form their ability of making judgement through critical assessment tasks, they had fewer opportunities for self-assessment and peer assessment. In addition to train students for criticality, creativity, and reflexivity, most lecturers also wanted students to become independent learners who could direct their own learning, and this will be explored in the next section.

6.5.3 Being independent learners

Through different learning and assessment activities, all ten lecturers aimed at training students to be self-directed, more responsible for their learning, and think independently during three years of undergraduate study:

> Essentially, I give them tips, also, you know, the book's there, the pronounced professor of classical history, blab blab blab... They're learning, and I'm just kind of empowering them, I think that's very important in all aspects of teaching, of making them more independent, more assured of the way they're presenting something, it's all about the argument, it's all about presenting, because I say to them, as long as it's not absolutely wrong, I don't care if you have different opinion to me, that's the nature of academic debate, as long as you can prove it. I'm absolute happy and I'll give you a mark for that. (Dr. Alconbury – English)

For Sociology students, essay writing was quite helpful because it trained them to work on their own:

> One thing I really enjoy...it seems to me that assessment this year is better than last year because a lot of essay questions seem to be quite useful. In a module, we just have: look at a political group of your choice and just discuss them, using the content of the module. Because you could go pretty much anywhere you wanted with this essay, so it's quite good to be self-directed in that way. (Mark)

Nonetheless, one of the most effective methods of assessment that had strong impacts on students' independent learning seemed to be the dissertation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the dissertation was an important part of the final year modules in Sociology, whereas it was optional in English. However, most lecturers in both departments emphasised its role in forming the ability to work and do research independently, and providing students with opportunities to take risks, to be creative and to prove themselves as competent learners:

> They have a lot of space if they want to be creative and ambitious. In fact, that's what we encourage them to do, and I think the scope that a big module like that offers actually enables students to really *shine*. The hard working ones, of course (laugh), the less hard-working ones will panick for a year or rather in the last minutes, but the good ones will really *shine.* They do very well in the dissertation. (Dr. Darcy)

Similarly, most Sociology students found the dissertation useful for them to practise working independently:

> The dissertation is useful to be combined with the tutor's meetings, which is more focused. You get that personal feedback. And it just seems different because it's such a long process, we have year-long modules, but here you're working on your own project, you do your debates, and it's *original*. So, that's good. (Una)

In brief, the lecturers were keen on forming students' capacity for independent learning through different assessment tasks, especially the dissertation in Sociology. Transferable skills were also what the lecturers focused on.

6.5.4 Transferable skills

Key transferable skills, including communication, team-working, time management, and working under pressure, were considered as essential to students' future employability and lives. As Dr. Grant (English) remarked:

> With economic downturn, and so on, a lot of graduates find themselves have to do jobs that are not related, even though they are graduate-level jobs, but they are not relevant to their subject of study. So I think this is where transferable skills are very very important.

As mentioned in the previous sections, written communication was developed through essays, projects, and dissertation, and team-working through group work. This section will focus on working under pressure, time management, and spoken communication, in which exams were perceived as helpful for working under pressure and essays for time management skills:

> The exams test their retention of materials, and the ability to work under pressure and within a very short space of time, the essays test and give them practice of planning their work and organising their time to meet the deadline. (Dr. Grant – English)

For lecturers, presentations were a useful assessment component for students to learn to communicate verbally and present a spoken piece, which might prepare them for LLL:

> One of the reasons we chose a presentation format was, particularly for third year students, they're likely to be going out to the workplace, and likely to have to give presentation as a part of their job interviews, for example, or have to give a presentation if they want to go under postgraduate study. It's a good skill for them to learn, but it's also a useful alternative mode of assessment for us to pair with the essay, we felt. It makes different demands upon your ability to organize your material and test different mode of communication: the ability to communicate verbal and present a spoken piece. (Dr. Firth – English)

However, presentations were used differently in the two departments. In English, they were in the form of an assessment component usually coupled with essays, especially in Drama. Meanwhile, in Sociology, perhaps due to constraints mentioned earlier, presentations were frequently used in seminars or in first year courses more as learning activities than as assessment tasks:

> We do quite a lot of this in first year, and we do presentation work in second and third year in some modules, not just in formal assessment, but we keep it going as part of the teaching activity because again obviously it's a very good skill for students to acquire because during the interview process that they have to go through to get a job when they leave us. (Dr. Bennett)

Most English students also recognised the importance of presentations to their future lives. For them, this form of assessment was authentic and helped them to be more flexible and confident in public speaking:

> Presentation gives you really good skills which are more applicable in real life than essay, definitely. I think all of us will get to some point in real life in which we will talk to others about our ideas, or in public speaking, have

> an idea, and formulate our argument, and discuss certain points. It has more flexibility than essay, improves your ability to present and interact with the audience. But the challenge is you have to make it interesting if you don't want the audience to fall asleep. (Jenny)

However, three of them also showed their concerns that some students were not used to doing presentations because they did not have chances to speak up. Thus, these students suggested having more presentations. The Sociology students also had similar opinions about the benefits of presentations, adding that group presentations helped them to 'balance their ideas', get more ideas from their peers and less pressure than individual presentations.

In addition to transferable skills and other capacities, one lecturer – Dr. Curtis, emphasised developing empathy for students:

> *Empathy* is a key term for English Studies. Reading about other people, and characters, and be able to analyse what's happening in English texts generate a sense of empathy – being able to appreciate the dilemma that people have. Generating empathy is vital not only in family, friends, but also in the workplace…. English is an interdisciplinary subject, encourages students to look broadly on ideas. Generating a sense of *empathy*, communication and analytical mind are the key skills both in the working environment and the social context as well.

At this point, one could conclude that the lecturers in both departments were trying to promote student intrinsic learning and develop capacities for critical thinking, creativity, reflexivity, and independent learning, as well as equipping them with transferable skills in order to prepare them for future work and lives. The next section will be about the last key element in Boud's framework – *giving and receiving feedback*.

6.6 Giving and receiving feedback

Giving more and better feedback was one of the most important activities, even if driven by the NSS results and students' module evaluations. All lecturers used similar ways: general feedback on the feedback sheet, detailed feedback annotated in the essays, through email, face-to-face on tutorial or during their office hours. Giving and receiving feedback was considered as a formative process to improve student learning. In both departments, students could see the lecturers during their office hours with their essay plans and get formative feedback. Such face-to-face feedback was considered very useful:

> For the dissertation, we get one-to-one feedback, so we get it as our personal questions to our tutor about the dissertation, which is always quite useful. I quite like that one-to-one feedback because you can get something from it to go back and improve. (Mark)

> It's just like to have an idea that you're on the right track. Because when you come up with a plan and away you go with your essay. And it's good just to run by them and check if it's OK, particularly language modules, like Stylistic or whatever, you know, you've got to apply a certain linguistic framework to a particular text. You want to know if you're not barking up at the wrong tree. (Molly – English)

However, this sort of feedback was optional; thus only hardworking students took the opportunities. For Dr. Fielding (Sociology), only 10 students showed up for face-to-face essay feedback, and it was much worse in Dr. Alconbury's (English) module: 'I had 240 students taking one assignment. Two students came to see me for exam feedback. And I was sitting there and twisting my thumb.' Similarly, Dr. Darcy (Sociology) remarked:

> The only difference between that and what we do in level one is that mine is not compulsory. I invite them to come, whether they come or not, it's up to them. Some students, however hard you kick them, they won't move (laugh), but the hard-working ones, the serious ones normally they will take the opportunity and they come to talk. So that's some kind of formative feedback.

Another reason for students' not coming for face-to-face feedback could also be explained by Dr. Curtis (English) as a 'stigma' which was a hangover from secondary school and became a pressure for students to refuse seeking lecturers' support:

> Between age 11 and 16, where you consult with teachers, you run a risk of being considered a 'square', being someone who is not fashionable, is out of place, isn't 'cool', and needs extra support. So there's a lot peer-pressure, maybe, since when I was at school, not to consult with teachers. And maybe some students, given the powerful agents of stigma, still feel the same way that it'll be more cool just to get on with it, not to be seen asking for help all the time and consulting with academic staff, so they may want to keep their concerns bottled up and refuse to express them. I don't know, but that's I think there's cultural pressure that has to be taken into account; the social and cultural pressures that students face.

In addition, students were required to see their personal tutors to discuss their academic results once every semester, and in English it was called 'feedback day'. From the lecturers' perspective, it was very helpful. However, from the students' perspectives, the effectiveness of feedback day seemed to be varied. For some students, it was helpful:

> I think that depends on the personal tutor, mine is really good. (Molly – English)
> It's useful as well because you get the overview of what you're graded for, you get a much practical guidance on it. (Una – Sociology)

For the others, the personal tutor was not the one who marked their essays and did not read them, thus he or she did not know how they got the marks. Most English students complained that the meeting is too short to talk about their marks or how to improve their assignments. That might explain why they did not find it useful:

> It's just 10 minutes, so how can you go through 4 or 5 different marks about 10 minutes? (Bridget)

> It's not a day. It may be a day for each lecturer, I'm sure it's a matter of convenience. Literally, what happens is there's a white envelope with your name on it which you have your essay in which you wrote about three

> months ago. 'Oh, I remember it. Well, it's a disaster, or whatever.' And you wait for a long time outside your tutor's office, and then you go in and they say: 'So, what do you think?' And they give you a sheet of paper with your average on it, and like 'So, how do you feel about that?' And I'm like: 'Yeah, good, bad,' and things like that. It's just not helpful at all. (Helen)

Their lecturers also admitted that 10 minutes for each student was what they could do because of heavy workload, and students could also see them during office hours:

> Probably not (sigh). No, it's probably not, to be honest, but it's all the time that we have at the moment. What I'll be doing, if students want to see me a bit more time, I won't be able to. I've got to teach in between those various appointments, but I think we have to make an appointment another time. So, I have office hours, and I always leave those free for students to come and see me. And I can be for follow-up and so forth as well. (Dr. Firth – English)

In short, there were similarities in lecturers' and students' opinions about face-to-face feedback and feedback day in both departments. Apart from these similarities, each department also had their own perspectives and practices on giving and receiving feedback.

6.6.1 Features of feedback in the Sociology department

In addition to *the module-based generic feedback*, the Sociology department focused on the efficiency in communicating feedback to students in which the lecturers were expected to give at least legible feedback. Therefore, they were encouraged to word process their feedback if their handwriting was not readable. As Dr. Fielding noted:

> I guess we've been obsessed with how we call it feedback and accuracy, and whether it can be electronic, and so on. That's why what I'm concentrating on in the minute is how we can be much more efficient in the articulation of feedback, and so on. So we kind of monitoring that, whether people should be asked…or forced to type up their written feedback, but it's still optional. I think a lot of people are doing it, but the dissertation

> was that if you think that your handwriting is difficult to read, you have to type it up.

Most lecturers hoped that their feedback would support students to improve their learning. However, the effectiveness of the feedback seemed to be uncertain. According to Dr. Maguire, there were two levels – the intended and the actual support of feedback. However, there might be a gap between what the intended and actual support that feedback could bring about. For him, it was uncertain that students would actually read it and use it to improve their learning in future:

> In reality though, I don't think we are as clear as we might be about what the students really do make of our feedback. Sometimes I have a suspicion that the students really look at the mark that they get and they don't take much account of what feedback they've been given. And if they got the mark above the pass mark, then, they are happy enough and they don't look at the feedback. I'm not convinced that it's a perfect tool to engage students in the developmental process of improvement, which is what feedback should be about.

From the students' viewpoints, most lecturers' written feedback was useful, quick, and actually helped them improve. However, they complained that in some modules, students did badly due to lack of feedback and guidance from the lecturers at earlier stages of their assignments:

> A lot of my friends did 'Social Survey Design' last year, and they seemed to struggle with the assessment itself because they had to produce a questionnaire, then post the results of the questionnaire on a database and analysed them, but I don't think they get feedback on the questionnaire itself. So that was wrong, and the data was obviously problematic, and the analysis was undermined because people didn't receive much feedback and guidance in the first phase of the assessment process. Everything failed because of that.

Thus, they wished to have more gradual, formative feedback built through different stages of their assignments to ensure that they would produce a good piece of work:

> It's ideal to progressively build up your assessment while having sort of gradual, progressive feedback as you go along, so encouraging, you just start early, put ideas together and go to see lecturers and tutors, just quickly around 10 minutes run by the ideas, like how you think it's going and adjust them. Even a little bit of feedback would be good so that you can also build a more coherent essay, and there's so much that can go into a really good essay. There's so much you can take for granted, so having a more step-by-step gradual approach and contact with tutors to get feedback to build up the essay are probably more helpful. (Tom)

Although there were some complaints from the students about the limitation of feedback, in general, for most Sociology lecturers and students, feedback seemed to support effectively students to improve their learning. However, most feedback was from lecturers to students, and peer-feedback was only found in informal situations, such as seminars and dissertation group meetings. Thus, there was no peer-feedback task as formal assessment in Sociology, which was different from the practice of giving and receiving feedback in English.

6.6.2 Features of feedback in the English department

The English Department was also keen on innovative feedback, especially on clearly communicating to students about how they could get feedback, office hours, feedback day, and so on in the feedback procedures published on the department's Intranet. They also had 'propaganda' to encourage students to come and see their tutor for feedback. According to Dr. Curtis, this seemed to be effective:

> Our school newsletters constantly reminds students about feedback, and my students are encouraged to take feedback, and there are posters on the school corridor that mentioned about personal tutors, and since this has been formalized or at least been made more practically public, so this year I've noticed an increase in uptake, people coming to see me more regularly to talk about their assignments and made general comments about their course, and there's no doubt that it's true the express publications of

> feedback opportunities are encouraged students to come and consult with us. So I think that's among very successful policies.

Although the number of students taking face-to-face feedback increased, there might be not many of them. However, it was important that more students started to form the habit of coming to talk to the lecturers, which might help to build up a culture of giving and receiving feedback and having more communication or dialogues between lecturers and students in the department.

While written feedback from essays was considered helpful and quick by most Sociology students, for the English, it rather depended on the tutors, and three of them complained about lecturers' returning their essays late:

> It depends on the tutors, really. Some people give very detailed feedback, saying like 'it's very good in this way, but in the future, don't do that', and that's very good because I can apply that to all of my essays. But I remember one essay in first year, because when we got it back, we got the mark and the feedback. I just got the feedback like: 'you haven't answered the questions, you have failed', but it was a really bad essay. (Bridget)

Most of them also complained about modules with one essay that counted 100% in which they did not have formative feedback and did not improve as a result:

> We do have feedback on the sheet, but in one assessment, and in this module we have no practice, and we just got this one 3000 word essay, you know, 100% of the module, and I think that's really bad. I think we should, even though it's pain, but maybe mini essays like once or twice in the term before the big one, like 1,500 words, non-assessed, but we do them to get some feedback. Even though we're doing English, we don't know how to write an essay. That sounds very silly, but that's a big part and we are expected to know. (Molly)

- Peer feedback in developing constructive criticism

Peer-feedback was used as one of the formal assessment components and well-supported by a new technology tool – Web CT in Dr. Grant's *Gothic Literature* and Dr. Curtis's *Academic Community.* In these modules, students produced blogs and submitted them on Web CT for their tutor and other students in the group to see and comment on them. For Dr. Curtis, peer feedback encouraged students to engage in a community of practice and debates:

> That allows students to have a certain degree of flexibility, allows them to experiment, or to engaging with the key issues. Importantly, other students, with the blogging, are involved in a community of practice, if you like, a shared network of making comments on each other's work. So when someone produces a blog and submit it on web CT, I can see it, but so as the other students in my group, and they can then respond and make comments, they can evaluate their peers' contribution, whether they agree or whether they are impressed by their ideas and in so doing debates develop.

Thus, he considered a good way for students to create a friendly and supportive environment where students actively participated, helped each other, as well as reflected on their own improvement. The peer-feedback task in Dr. Grant's *The Gothic Literature* also had similar aims. In addition to the blogs, students also submitted, using Web CT, two pieces of feedback on other students' draft essay for that module which they could learn to work up to the final assessed essay. Students made peer judgement based on a set of guidelines provided by Dr. Grant especially for this task. The draft itself was not assessed, but their feedback was assessed. For him, by judging their friends' essays against the criteria, students had opportunities to practise thinking as assessors, understood more about the criteria, reflected on their own essays and improved as such:

> The feedback task is trying to teach them two skills, really: one is partly about getting them thinking as assessors, so, thinking about ‘OK, here’s the set of criteria that we use as markers, and OK, now pretend you’re marking this essay, how would you apply that criteria?’ So teaching them how to do that, and that means they can then reflect on their own essays, and it is bridging that gap between what the assessment criteria say and what they actually do when they’re writing their essay, or more importantly when they’re going back and editing their essay or revising their essay before submitting them.

In addition, it taught them how to make criticism constructively and positively and justify their judgement in explaining why they thought their peers’ essays were good or what needed to be revised. This, as Dr. Grant remarked, was to prepare students for their future lives when they had to give feedback to somebody in working situations:

> Most students will move on into careers where at some point they’ll need to give feedback to somebody. So, it’s about teaching them how to give constructive criticism, identify what’s positive, and not just saying: ‘OK, this is good’, but saying why it is good. So a positive comment is not just a pat on the back, but one that specifically targets to say: ‘this is good because of this’, and also getting them used to the fact that they need to give critical comments where it’s appropriate as well, doing so in a way that it is positive, but nevertheless saying, ‘OK, this is perhaps one of the weakest points in your essay, this is a way that you might be thinking of revising it so, it will improve in the future.’

For him, students had very positive comments on the task because of its usefulness in helping them to learn these important skills and develop their writing:

> They seem to response very well to that. Again something that there’s a little bit unsure about it at first because they’re not been asked to do it before. And the feedback they’ve had is very very positive. And it seems to be improving in their essay writing skill as well. Meaning that they’re actually better authors as well, their writing skill is improved as well.

Nonetheless, Dr. Grant emphasised that in order for students to take it seriously, the task had to be a formal assessment component because in the past, it was non-assessed and students did not pay much attention to it. In addition to the blogs and peer-feedback task through Web CT, peer feedback was also applied in some other modules in the classroom, especially in presentations. Four out of seven students believed it was helpful to get peer feedback. Yet, their feedback for others was not helpful because they just wanted to say good things about others' performance, and one of them preferred getting feedback from the lecturer instead:

> I've done it in *the 20th Century Plays*, we assessed somebody else's presentation with a feedback form. I didn't want to be like: 'Well, this bit is rubbish.' Every week, I just kind of wrote: 'Yeah, pretty good, pretty good.' But when it came to mine, I thought it would be really helpful to have their feedback. (Helen)

> We do not really care about other people's work, and this seems selfish, but I'd rather have one of the lecturers gives feedback to me. (Jenny)

To sum up, in both English and Sociology, the lecturers were trying to provide students with more formative feedback, encouraging more dialogues with the lecturers about their essay plans during office hours, discussing with them about their mark profiles, and so on. However, Sociology tended to emphasise more on improving written feedback. Meanwhile, English encouraged more face-to-face and peer feedback. The blogs and peer-feedback tasks showed the English lecturers' commitment towards using feedback to make students reflect on what they had done or critically and constructively judge others' work in order to improve their own performance.

6.7 Conclusion

There was convincing evidence that most elements of Boud's framework – *engaging students, authentic activities, integrative activities, learning and judgement, modelling and practice,* and *giving and receiving feedback* – were present in the assessment practices of the English and Sociology lecturers. Although self-assessment and peer assessment was still weakly seen as formal assessment components and students did not design assessment in the sense that they created the rubrics or their own test, they definitely had opportunities to form the ability of making judgements through writing critical essays or doing projects, as well as participating in the design process by making their own decision on the assessment topics. This evidence suggested that most lecturers in the study were keen on using assessment activities to improve student learning and preparing them for life after university. They both aimed at helping students become *critical*, *independent*, *creative*, *reflexive, cooperative* and *employable* although reflexivity seemed to be a weaker focus than other capacities.

However, there were a few differences in their practices: there were more reflexive assessment tasks in English than Sociology, and English focused more on improving face-to-face and peer feedback, whereas written feedback was more emphasised in Sociology. Students in both departments had quite similar ideas that they both appreciated the use of essays, presentations, group work, and feedback in helping them to learn; simultaneously they complained about a lack time for face-to-face feedback, especially on feedback day, as well as a lack of guidance in some modules and unfairness in group work. In general, with the weak presence of reflexive and self-assessment tasks and the absence of the element ‘students designing assessment’ in the sense that students create their own tests, as well as existing problems of feedback and group work, the MU still showed an incomplete picture of Boud’s framework.

7 Chapter seven: Describing and analysing key assessment features in the English and Sociology departments of the HCMU

7.1 Introduction

Chapter five and chapter six have explored key assessment features and the operationalisation of Boud's framework in the MU. Starting with a brief introduction of assessment in Vietnamese HE, this chapter will then describe and explain some distinctive features of assessment in the English and Sociology departments of the HCMU and the findings from the peer feedback intervention at the English Department. The analysis was based on the following sources of data:

(i) *the HCMU's policy documents related to assessment at university level and at the two selected departments*,

(ii) *the interviews with the University Head of Assessment and ten staff (senior managers and lecturers) in the two selected departments*, and

(iii) *two final year English and Sociology student focus groups (Six students/each).*

(iv) *The peer feedback intervention: Students' feedback on their peers' essays (25 papers), a qualitative questionnaire for 25 students, a focus group with five students*, and *a semi-structured interview with the lecturer teaching this course*.

The chapter will attempt to answer the same three research questions for the HCMU as addressed in the MU:

1. What are the features of current learning assessment policies at the level of the University and in Social Sciences and Humanities

undergraduate programmes at the Ho Chi Minh City University (HCMU), Vietnam in respect of (i) student learning, (ii) assessment and desirable learning outcomes, (iii) assessment and LLL?

2. What are the assessment philosophies and practices of lecturers in selected Social Sciences and Humanities departments of the HCMU in relation to (i) student learning, (ii) assessment and desirable learning outcomes, (iii) assessment and LLL?
3. What are student experiences of assessment at selected departments of the two universities? In what way (if at all) has assessment developed them as lifelong learners?

I argue that the traditional assessment regime in these two departments may hinder attempts to make changes, and thus it should be more flexible to facilitate the shift of assessment from testing to supporting learning.

7.2 Assessment in Vietnamese HE

Assessment in the Vietnamese HE is characterised by the traditional examination system that has existed since the feudal times and strongly influenced and shaped the present assessment in that summative assessment still plays a dominant role in the assessment regime at universities with the use of marks to inform learning. In terms of policies, assessment did not gain much attention from policy makers, compared with management, curriculum, teaching, and learning until 1999 when the first official resolution on HE assessment – Resolution 4 on *Organising HE teaching, learning, and Assessment for Regular Students* and the second – Resolution 31 on

Regarding to piloting HE teaching, learning, and assessment in the Credit-based System for regular students in 2001 were issued. These resolutions include guidelines about tests, exams, and classifying students (MOET 1999, 2001). However, the role of summative assessment with written exams as the main method is highlighted in these resolutions, thus there seems to be no actual change in assessment policies at this stage.

With the establishment of the General Department for Educational Testing and Quality Accreditation in 2003 and the transformation of a year-based to a credit-based HE system since 2001, the MOET issued Resolution 25 on *Organizing HE teaching and learning for Regular Students* in 2006 and Resolution 43 on *HE Training Credit-based System for Regular Students* in 2007, as mentioned in the Introduction chapter. Different from Resolutions 4 and 31 that emphasised summative assessment, Resolutions 25 and 43 marked an important initial move in assessment policies and perspectives from summative assessment to formative assessment. They regulated that the final marks must be the sum of different components: the obligatory final exam that must count above 50% of the total marks, and some other ongoing assessment tasks during the learning process, such as on-going mini-tests, practical assessment tasks, participation in group discussions, class attendance, or the mid-term (MOET 2006b, 2007b). Apart from the obligatory final exam, lecturers can choose methods of other assessment tasks as long as they can justify why they use these methods, which must then be approved by the rector of the university (*ibid.*). Although there was no guideline about these alternative methods of assessment, these changes was a positive signal for more future changes in the assessment regimes at universities.

Essentially, the MOET launched a resolution on *Holistic Assessment of the Student's Self-improvement* (HASS) in Vietnamese universities and colleges, which was separated from academic achievement. It aims at holistically assessing five aspects of students' lives: *(i) awareness of learning; (ii) conforming to the university regulation*s; *(iii) taking part in the university activities* (e.g. cultural, music, sports, social activities organized by the university); *(iv) fulfilling citizen's responsibility and community relationships* (through charity or community support activities); and *(v) fulfilling the responsibility of class representatives and the Youth Unions' representatives* (MOET 2007a).

In short, in the Vietnamese HE assessment policy, there have been initial attempts to change from summative to formative assessment and to fully develop intellectual and moral capacities, as well as responsibilities for society. The next section will explore how the policy works in practice and what is going on in assessment in the Vietnamese case.

7.3 The HCMU's assessment regime and departmental practices

With the implementation of the MOET's assessment policy in Resolutions 25 and 43 for the new credit-based system, the HCMU's assessment regulation recognised the continuous process and other methods of assessment.

Accordingly, the final exam counted 70% of the total grade, and the other 30% was the mid-term mark, which could be from the midterm test, discussion participation, learning practices, exercises, or how studious the student was during his or her learning process. Lecturers could choose the assessment methods for this 30% grade and allocate their weighting as long as they were put on the course description and approved by the university rector. They were required to submit students' transcripts with two columns: the midterm and the final exam grades (HCMU 2009: 10). Without detailed guidelines about how to use these alternative methods, how was this policy implemented in the two departments? How and why were assessment perspectives and practices in these departments similar and different from each other?

7.3.1 University assessment regulations and departmental responses to reforming practices

In appearance, all transcripts submitted to the University registry seemed to be similar with two columns of midterm and final grade. However, in the course descriptions of the two departments, the assessment methods to come up with such weighting tended to be very different from each other, as summarised in Table 7.1. From this table, more influences of international assessment perspectives and practices in the English department were seen. Among its 58 courses, only two strictly followed the University regulation, and the rest tended to reduce the percentage of the final exam and use other combined methods. Meanwhile, fewer attempts were made to reduce the weighting of the final exam in Sociology. Group presentations were the most common alternative assessment method in both departments, used more by English than Sociology.

Table 7.1 Assessment methods in the 2009-2010 course descriptions of the two departments

Departments	Number of courses	Courses with 70% final exam	Courses using the most common alternative assessment methods		
			Group presentations	The student's learning process (participation in learning activities)	mini-projects
English	58	2	25	22	6
Sociology	31	27	9	5	8

(HCMU's Sociology Department 2009, HCMU's English Department 2009)

Table 7.1 also showed that English seemed to focus much more on assessing the student's learning process than Sociology; however, mini-projects were more popular in Sociology. This could be because Sociology emphasises research more, thus students were required to do mini research projects on social issues. Such diversity in assessment practices in the two departments might originate from the differences in perspectives of senior managers and lecturers, which will be explored in the following sections.

- Assessment practices in the English department

English senior managers and lecturers showed strong commitment to changing their assessment practices. For them, the University assessment regulations seemed to help bring about changes in preventing some lecturers from using only one final exam, and thus it was more beneficial to the students, providing them with more chances to improve their work during the learning process. However, many English lecturers wanted more flexibility, as Dr. Mai – Dean of English – pointed out:

> Many lecturers don't like these two column grades. They argue that there should be participation or contribution marks because some students make good contribution to the learning activities and have good and creative ideas in class; however, when they take the exam, for some reason, their marks aren't as good as their actual ability. So, if we take only the midterm test and the final exam as 30%-70%, it's not fair enough to assess the students.

Thus, the lecturers were keen on finding ways to make this regulation more appropriate by balancing grades, reducing the dominance of the final exam, and applying alternative assessment methods borrowed and adopted from the West. Their efforts to change assessment practices could be seen in Table 7.2:

Table 7.2 Assessment practices of five English senior managers and lecturers

Lecturers	**Courses**	**Final exam**	**Midterm test**	**Alternative assessment methods**
Dr Mai (Dean)	Literature	70%		group presentation: 30%
Dr. Lam (Vice-Dean)	Writing	40%	30%	writing three types of essays: 30%
Ms. Chi	Translation	60%		group presentation: 20% and group mini-project: 20%
Ms. Phuong	Writing	50%	30%	writing portfolio: 20%
Mr. Minh	Translation	70%	20%	in-class translation group work during the course: 10%

Among these five lecturers, only Mr. Minh viewed assessment as a final product rather than a process, thus he mainly used the exams, with in-class translation group work counting only 10% of the grade. Meanwhile, the other four lecturers believed that assessment should be continuous, and they focused more on assessing the learning process**.** In their assessment practices, the traditional final exam was still a very important part of assessment; however, it was no longer completely dominant. They used group presentations, mini-projects, writing assignments, and portfolios in order to balance the grades and improve student learning. As Ms. Chi stated:

> The final exam is necessary and is a good way to help students revise and self-reflect on what they have learned during the course. Many students are lazy; without exam pressure, they may not do any revision and reflection at all and may forget everything. However, it would be problematic if we considered it the only way to assess the students because it would make students learn only for the final exam. Students need to be assessed on how they learn and how they develop their skills during the course, which definitely need other methods of assessment in addition to exams.

Essentially, the Dean and Vice-Dean showed their willingness and support of these changes, as well as applying alternative assessment methods themselves, which could motivate lecturers in the department to follow them. As Dr. Lam – Vice-Dean posited: 'Our philosophy of education here in our department is to establish a kind of *ongoing* process in terms of teaching, learning, and assessment. So, assessment as an ongoing process was a new trend that we are applying.'

- Assessment practices in the Sociology department

Unlike the English Dean and Vice-Dean, who were committed to assessment innovation, Dr. Hung – Dean of Sociology tended to be more 'traditional':

> When we assess students, we just follow the university regulations: 30% midterm and 70% final exam… Of course the assessment now still has problems, but we can't adjust it due to the regulations of the university. We can't assess students differently; however, we need to change the way we teach to help students improve their learning.

In the Sociology senior manager's view, teaching, not assessment, seemed to be the focus of change. Thus, there seemed to be limited attention to the role of assessment in improving teaching and learning. Sociology lecturers were more content with the regulation, followed it more strictly, and believed it was much better than in the past:

> The assessment 30% –70% is due to the university's regulations. It doesn't depend on us anymore. I am just a person who does what is required by the university's regulations. It's not our own idea to assess the students like that. (Mr. Tan)
>
> Assessing student learning depends on the assessment regulation of the university, and lecturers' flexibility is also within this regulation. (Dr. Hoa)

Clearly, this regulation was used as a reason for no or fewer changes in the lecturers' assessment practices, although they did not say much about why. That might explain why Dr. Hung and Mr. Tan strictly followed the regulation in their assessment practices. However, evidence of borrowed international assessment methods could also be seen in the assessment practices of three other lecturers (see Table 7.3) and in Dr. Hoa's course, the final exam was replaced by an individual mini-project. However, there was no discussion on assessment as an ongoing process or about reducing the dominant role of the final exam.

Although most lecturers in both departments applied international assessment practices, such borrowing was selective and critical with careful consideration about differences on culture and context. Dr. Hoa (Sociology) strongly emphasised that these practices could not be exactly copied and that it was important to consider whether they could work in the Vietnamese settings, what might or might not work and that. Similarly, Dr. Mai (English) posited that:

> If we adapt something from Western cultures, we need to consider whether the learners, their attitude to learning and their learning motivation, as well as the lecturers and their teaching, are similar or different to learners and lecturers in Western countries. If we have something similar, then East and West can meet in some way. However, if we are totally different, will it work if we do things like them?

Table 7.3 Assessment practices of five Sociology senior managers and lecturers

Lecturers	Courses	Final exam	Midterm test	Alternative assessment methods
Dr. Hung (Dean)	Contemporary Social issues	70%	30%	
Mr. Tan	Introduction to Sociology	70%	30%	
Dr. Hoa	Research Methodology			Group presentation (30%) and individual mini-project (70%).
Ms. Huong	Gender Sociology	60%		Group presentations 30%, participation in discussions: 10%.
Ms. Yen	Social Statistics	70%	20%	In-class group exercises: 10%.

In brief, assessment in both departments was dominated by the traditional exam combined with internationally influenced and strategically borrowed assessment practices which were found more in English than Sociology. They have different interpretations of the University assessment regulation. The English senior managers and lecturers were willing to break its rigidity and interpret it in the direction of reforming assessment practices. Meanwhile, the Sociologists used it to justify why they did not focus on changing assessment although some alternative assessment methods were applied. These differences might be explained by the histories and cultures of each department, as well as lecturers' experiential learning of assessment.

7.3.2 Departments' histories and cultures

The English department seemed to experience much more international influences due to its history and culture. Historically, this department was established in 1955 when the Americans occupied the South of Vietnam and brought in an American education model. Thus, it experienced American educational influences in its curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment. Together with the current trend of globalisation and internationalisation in Vietnamese HE, this department seemed to be quicker in integrating into contemporary assessment perspectives and practices. Many English lecturers have studied abroad (mainly in the US, Australia, Canada, the Philippines), or attended courses taught by international experts. As Dr. Mai remarked, 'One advantage of our department is that most lecturers have studied overseas, and they are keen on applying what they've learned from abroad.' They were also influenced by teaching and assessment perspectives and practices on textbooks and materials from the West and international visiting lecturers working at the department. All these international influences were gradually implanted into the departmental culture and facilitated changes in assessment perspective and practices.

Meanwhile, such international influences were not that strong in Sociology. The department of Sociology was established in 1995 and was still a 'young' department, with less international influences than English. There seemed to be fewer opportunities for international exchange and integration, as well as approaching contemporary assessment perspectives and practices. For one thing, it might be because the Sociology department was slower in keeping pace with global changes, and thus they missed many opportunities of international integration. Also, they seemed to be not very dynamic in looking for cooperation with international universities and organizations. Due to their limitation in foreign languages, not many lecturers went abroad to study and consult international resources to update their knowledge and skills. As Dr. Hung stated: 'One of the greatest difficulties for our lecturers is that their ability to read English materials is still weak, and this affects their opportunities for professional development'. A few lecturers, who had studied abroad, initiated and implemented changes by applying what they had learned, yet many lecturers still used only exams. Therefore, this could be one of the reasons that made its lecturers' assessment perspectives and practices more 'traditional'. Together with the differences in departments' histories and cultures, the lecturers' experiential learning about assessment was another feature that may cause assessment diversity between English and Sociology.

7.3.3 Lecturers' experiential learning about assessment

Assessment practices in both departments were mainly based on the lecturers' own learning experience gained from two different sources: how they had been assessed when they themselves were students at Vietnamese universities, and the other from how they had been assessed when they studied overseas or attended postgraduate or training courses taught by international or

Vietnamese experts. English lecturers were more familiar with alternative assessment methods:

> As language students [ourseves], we did a lot of pair work, group work, and presentations, for example, in Speaking, pronunciation, and translation, so we've got experience in doing them, but of course each class is different, so we have to think about how to do it well in our own classroom. (Ms. Chi)

However, Sociology lecturers' experience might be different because of the subject disciplines. Ms. Yen explained why she implemented group exercises or group presentation:

> It's from my own experience of being a student myself. I didn't like sitting and listening to lectures all the time. Now as a lecturer, I don't want just to give lectures. I feel tired and bored if I just talk all the time, and I know my students also feel the same. And also, with statistics, it's much related to mathematics, so I want the students to feel relaxed, enjoy the session, and encourage the students to participate in the lessons.

It seemed that what these Sociology teaching staff experienced in their own student life was mainly lecturing and they did not have a very good impression of it; therefore, they were trying to reduce it in their own teaching. Meanwhile, their English colleagues had gone through many different learning and assessment activities, and this gave them better preparation for the implementation or innovation of their teaching and assessment practices. However, in both cases there was a concern for student learning and engaging the students.

In addition to the experience from how they themselves had been assessed as undergraduates, the lecturers' assessment practices in both departments were strategically borrowed from what they learned as postgraduates abroad or from short training courses and tailored to be suitable and applicable in their classroom contexts:

> When I attended a three- month training course in Sociology in the Philippines, the lecturers used group presentations, and I found it interesting. But there were only around 20 people in that training course. When I apply it in my class, because there are so many students, and I have to think about how to make as many students take part in as I can, so for each topic, there will be two groups in charge: One group makes the presentation, the other group questions or argues against it, or modifies what lacks or is still vague in that presentation. (Ms. Huong – Sociology)

In short, assessment practices in both English and Sociology were mainly based on lecturers' experiential learning. This could be a good thing because, from their experience, they might choose what worked for them in their own situations. Arguably, these assessment practices might lack expertise or professionalism because each of them experienced assessment differently and implemented assessment methods in their own way; yet there was no policy and detailed guidelines, no published common assessment standards and criteria, no evaluation on its effectiveness or academic discussion on what needed to be improved. The similarities or differences in perspectives and practices, and the reasons for choosing assessment methods could also be influenced by many constraints in the HCMU context, as analysed in the following section.

7.4 Constraints that hinder changes in assessment practices at the two departments

This section will explore the constraints that hinder changes in assessment practices. Generally, lecturers in both departments were facing many difficulties in their teaching and assessment process, but Sociology lecturers seemed to encounter more challenges, which made it more difficult for them to develop alternative assessment methods. Among them were four major constraints: *low salaries of lecturers, over-crowded classes, lack of professional development in assessment;* and *lack of support from different levels in the University.*

7.4.1 Low salaries of lecturers

Perhaps low salaries were one of the most serious problems that de-motivated lecturers to change their teaching and assessment practices. Similar to colleagues from all public universities and many other governmental officers, the HCMU's lecturers received very low pay, although the government confirmed that 'Education is the national priority' and the budget for education was increasing[7] in recent years. However, such budget was spent more on lower levels of education rather than HE[8], and the expenditure for HE prioritised upgrading the infrastructure, developing training programmes, materials, teaching and management staff rather than increasing salary for lecturers (World Bank 2009). For Dr. Kim – the HCMU's Head of Assessment, only devoted lecturers were still working there instead of choosing another job or moving to other private universities with much better income:

> The salary of this public university is too low. I have to emphasize that it's too, too low, about 30, 000 VND per period – 45 minutes (1.4 USD). Whereas when I teach at a private university, it's 250, 000 or 300, 000

[7] Spending on education and training in 2008 = 5.9% GDP, compared with 2000 = 3.0% GDP (World Bank 2009: 10)
[8] State budget by sub-sector (%) in 2006: early childhood=7.47, primary=31.21, lower secondary= 21.59, upper secondary=10.33,vocational=3.43, professional secondary=2.62, **HE= 8.91**, other=14.43.(World Bank 2009:10).

VND (12–14 USD), which is ten times more than that. So, the people who still stay here are certainly those who are committed to teaching.

More evidence could be seen in Table 7.4 in which, compared with other sectors like private or foreign-invested companies, the monthly income of the HCMU's lecturers was only around a half of their colleagues in Hoa Sen Private University and of professionals who worked in manufacturing, and nearly one third of those in financial sectors. Middle-level managers of the HCMU, like Deans or Vice-Deans, received an income of only less than a half of their peers at Hoa Sen University and one fourth of managers in finance.

Table 7.4 Average monthly income in different jobs in USD

	Jobs	**Average monthly income**	
		University lecturer/ Professional in other sectors	Manager
1	The HCMU (a public university)[9]	297	393
2	Hoa Sen University (a private university)	445	914
3	Finance [10]	662	1,632
4	Consumer goods (e.g. Salespersons)	625	1,562
5	Manufacturing (e.g. Engineers)	570	1,215

(The Saigon Times Daily 2008; VietNamNet Bridge 2009a)

[9] The income in Vietnam Dong (VND) in jobs 1 and 2 has been converted into USD, accordingly 1USD = 20,880 VND (Foreign exchange rate on 19 February 2010. Online.<http://www.vnexpress.net>)

[10] In jobs 3, 4, & 5, the statistics from Annual Vietnam Salary Survey in 2008 by Navigos Group: Annual gross earning: Finance: professionals US$7,945 and managers: US$19,591. The consumer goods industry: Professional: US$7,504 and manager: US$18,752. Manufacturing: professional: US$6,840, Manager: US$14,588. These numbers have been divided into 12 months in table 5. The statistics is based on analysing the data collected from 64,905 job holders at 206 companies in Vietnam, including 71% foreign-invested companies and 29% Vietnamese firms.

Such payment was definitely not enough for lecturers' living expenses, especially those who have to support a family. Therefore, they had to do more teaching at other private universities to earn extra money; consequently, they did not have time to concentrate on improving and innovating their teaching or assessment. Dr. Hung explained:

> When people go to work, they care much about salary, but when the salary isn't enough for them to survive, they can't be committed to what they're doing. If they teach the whole day and also teach night classes, how can they find time to read books or do research? So, it's difficult because people can have motivation and commitment only when their income is stable and enough for them to support their family.

Due to low salaries, the departmental senior managers could only encourage lecturers, but could not ask them to change their assessment methods because they would have more work to do without pay when they had already had heavy workloads. Clearly, low salary could be one of the causes that prevented assessment changes. Another problem, over-crowded classes, also strongly affected lecturers' choice of assessment methods.

7.4.2 Over-crowded classes

Over-crowded classes brought about many challenges in organising teaching, learning and assessment activities in both departments. Usually, an English class had around 30–40 students, but this number went up to 50–65 in general language skills courses. This number made it difficult for the lecturers and students to organise and practise language skills, such as speaking or pronunciation, and giving ongoing feedback on students' Literature or Writing assignments. However, over-crowded classes seemed to be much more problematic in Sociology with classes of 60 to 100 or 150 students, especially in the first and second year courses. This made some lecturers decide not to use alternative teaching and assessment methods:

> It would be ideal to have 30-40 students in one class, but this is impossible in first or second years of Sociology, so I don't want to dream about it. We may attain around 70-80. For sure if I have around 70 students, the teaching methods will be different. I want my students to do group presentation and discussions. However, with around 150 students, how can we do that? Which groups do it and which groups don't? Also, if all the groups do it, how can we find enough time for them because this course is only 45 periods? (Mr. Tan)

Also teaching such crowded classes, Dr. Hoa and Ms. Huong were more committed to applying group presentations and mini-projects. However, Ms. Huong was puzzled about its effectiveness and failed to get many students engaged:

> I wish there were fewer students in the class so that the teaching and learning would be better. I myself use group presentation, but with a 100 or 150 student class, when we apply student-centred approach with lecturer – student interaction, we'll be lucky to have two third of the class who can learn, and one third say that they don't learn anything at all because they just sit there and listen without speaking up or taking part in the debate. But if we just give lectures, all students will just sit and listen. And I really don't know what to do. (Ms. Huong)

Like Ms. Huong, the students also complained about the disengagement of many classmates when there were too many students in the class:

> Because the class is crowded, only some of us do the presentation and ask questions. The majority just sits there and listens. Many even don't read the topic in advance, so they have no ideas what their friends are talking about (Hai).

Dr. Hoa also acknowledged these limitations, but she was still keen on applying alternative assessment methods: 'Over-crowded classes affect assessment quality, and I'm not sure if my assessment is accurate and fair for all students. We can only try our best to do what we can for the students.'

In short, over-crowded classes seemed to be a big hindrance in both departments, especially Sociology. It discouraged changes and made teaching and assessment less effective and many students disengaged. However, with strong commitment to change, some lecturers were trying to overcome these difficulties. Together with low salary and over-crowded classes, the lack of professional development in assessment was another obstacle in the changing process.

7.4.3 Lack of professional development (PD) in assessment

As mentioned in the previous section, the lecturers' practices were mainly based on their own learning experience about assessment as undergraduates themselves and postgraduates overseas or attending short training courses or seminars about their own disciplines or teaching and learning in which assessment was a very small part. There was no assessment course offered by the university. In addition, some PD courses might not be very helpful and effective because they tended to emphasise theories and were decontextualised. As Mr. Tan – Sociology remarked:

> I attended a *Teaching Methodology* course, but I don't gain much from it. This may be because the lecturers of this course aren't convincing enough. They teach a lot of theories and some of them studied from overseas and just do research. They don't have their own teaching experience to share, but just talk about what other countries do, and ask why other countries can do it, but we can't? I think they should look at what really happens in our present situation and be realistic about teaching and learning in our own context.

It seemed that the focus of most PD courses was on teaching and learning, and thus assessment was neglected. This lack of PD in assessment might make lecturers confused when applying alternative assessment methods, especially the young and inexperienced, like Ms. Huong (Sociology), because they were not sure if it was the right thing to do:

> I have done the assessment in group presentation, using one group who presents and the other who questions or argues against it for a few semesters. I know that no other lecturer does it, so I wonder if it's appropriate or not because sometimes the debate is to the point and come up with new ideas, but sometimes the students just beat around the bush. Actually, it's also quite challenging for the lecturer because sometimes, new issues come up in the debates, and I haven't prepared for them yet. So, when assessing the students like that, I think it has some advantages but also difficulties for me.

These lecturers obviously needed someone with professionalism and experience in assessment to share in order to improve their practice. Thus, for most of them, PD in assessment was needed to provide them with more expertise to assess students better:

> I think courses about teaching and assessment methods are necessary and helpful for lecturers, especially the young ones like myself because they guide us and help improve our teaching methods. There are many young lecturers at the university, and they are different from the older generation, so they need to be trained in a different way in order to have a more dynamic and active style in teaching and better ways to assess our students. (Ms. Yen – Sociology)

> I need more training on assessment, because when I did my MA here, the testing course only helped us to know how to design tests. I usually assess my students using my experience and also from some methods that I learned in the MA course, but if talking about expertise in assessment, I don't think I have that expertise. (Ms. Chi – English)

Such PD courses or seminars, according to Mr. Minh (English), should be for both the inexperienced and experienced so that they could agree with each other about common assessment standards and criteria to be published and implemented because each lecturer was assessing students with their own standards and criteria, and this might lead to arbitrary judgement. Another constraint was the lack of support from different levels: the university management board, lecturers, and students.

7.4.4 Lack of support from different levels in the University

In spite of recent changes in educational management, Vietnamese HE was still a traditional centralised system managed by the MOET and the state. The HCMU's regulations and decisions were made by the top managerial level, and all departments had to act upon them with little flexibility. Therefore, it was difficult to do things differently. For Dr. Mai, this rigid system might limit rather than support the changes that the departmental senior managers wanted to make:

> Sometimes, I feel that we lack support and encouragement from the university management to make any changes because the regulations of the system constrain them. So, we can only try to reduce the pressure of the final exam. The university will never accept that we won't have the final exam because they want it to be standardized to be easier to control the quality.

Such a system also formed lecturers' habits of following rather than questioning, taking part in strategic planning, or suggesting what the management board needed to consider. Thus, lecturers did not have much autonomy, and their voice seemed to be silent in the decision making process: 'We get used to doing what is required by the university and have rarely been asked about what we want to do' (Ms. Phuong). As Dr. Hoa remarked:

> Lecturers should be given more autonomy in assessment because each course has its own features, so assessment need to be more flexible so that lecturers can choose appropriate assessment methods for their own course. There shouldn't be rigid regulations, of course there should be regulations, but these need flexibility.

These barriers might be the reason why many courses used only exams. While lecturers' autonomy was limited by the University, the University could not make its own decisions in many cases because it was also controlled and constrained by the MOET and the state. For example, the MOET decided the quota of students being recruited each year, and the university could not reduce the number of students despite limited resources. In addition, the state regulated the level of tuition fees and allocated a budget for public universities with strict requirements on how it was spent (Hayden and Lam 2010). According to Professor Pham Phu, tuition for public universities decided by the state in 2009 was 240,000 VND per month (= 11.5 USD), increasing to only 60,000 VND (= 2.8 USD) after 10 years (VietnamNet Bridge 2009b). Although they were too low, the university did not have the right to increase them or to allocate its budget as it wanted to. Consequently, like most public universities, it did not have enough human and financial resources for major changes, which led to limited and low quality facilities and a serious lack of library resources. Apart from those caused by the management system, another constraint directly came from the lecturers and students themselves. Not all lecturers were committed to change:

> Some lecturers, particularly those who are senior, may not be willing to change or apply new things. This may be because they feel comfortable with what they've done or probably don't want to change their assessment habit, and they are stick to it. (Dr. Lam)

> Only the lecturers who are very responsible, committed to teaching, and want to make changes do it. For other lecturers, they just let the students do the midterm test and the final exam, and submit the marks and that's it, and they don't need to care if assessment is ongoing or not. (Dr. Mai)

Significantly, lecturers' commitment to changing their assessment practices was a value that should be maintained and sustained. However, due to constraints, their commitment might not be sustainable:

> For me, as a lecturer, I just simply think I'll try to do my best as long as I can. Sometimes, I feel tired and depressed. But I comfort myself that I just try my best until I can't be committed any more, then I'll change my job. (Ms. Yen – Sociology)

> Before, my students could see me for face-to-face feedback, but after getting married, I've been very busy with the children and my study, then I don't have time for it any more. I think there should be more extra paid time for lecturers in order to enable that. If not, it's difficult to encourage them to do so without pay. (Ms. Chi – English)

Similarly, many students also did not cooperate with those changes. For example, they did not prepare the lessons and thus could not take part in class discussions:

> We also need the students to be more co-operative. For example, when I give the articles for students to read at home and discuss later in class, at least they have to read that. But many students don't. And in class, when I ask them about the content of this article, they don't know because they haven't read it, so they can't take part in the discussion. (Dr. Hoa)

In summary, the lecturers were facing many constraints, and especially those in Sociology. This helped explain why alternative assessment methods were applied less in Sociology, why assessment reform in both departments was treated as an extra, and only committed lecturers did it. During the interviews, most lecturers showed frustration and dissatisfaction about the rigidity and ineffectiveness of the HE central management system that discouraged their innovative efforts. Arguably, it can be a positive sign to stimulate reform and decentralisation of the educational system, starting from the MOET and the University Management Board, to better support and sustain any changes in lecturers' teaching and assessment practices.

In addition to the above-mentioned assessment features at the English and Sociology departments, another feature – *developing expansive graduate attributes of students* – might be considered as an effort in helping students to function well in society.

7.5 Developing expansive graduate attributes of students

Developing expansive attributes seemed to be a distinctive feature of teaching, learning and assessment activities of the HCMU, which could be seen through the implementation of the HASS, and the integration of citizenship education into the teaching and learning activities. Students were encouraged to take part in communal activities, such as taking care of old people or disabled children and orphans, teaching illiterates in remote areas in the *Green Summer Campaign*[11], or activities organised by the University. They then would reflect and assess themselves, and their self-assessment would be considered in a class meeting by their classmates and the lecturer in charge of the class. The students felt that it was a good way to for them to learn to become more caring and helpful to other people and do useful things for society:

> After visiting and helping in houses for disabled children, I thought I was so lucky compared with them, but I didn't think about it before. Because I was luckier, I should help others who were less lucky than me, and I should live better. (Kim)
>
> My classmates and I attended the *Green Summer Campaign* to help people in the remote areas by guiding them how to live hygienically, teaching the illiterate and collect rubbish in the street with the people there to make the environment clean. We all felt happy and fun because we did something useful for the community. (Hai)

Similarly, according to the lecturers in both departments, the activities made students more responsible for others and also for themselves, to know how to help and sympathise with others, as the Vietnamese traditional communal values:

[11] The Green Summer Campaign is held by the Youth Union each year for students to help people in the remote areas: teaching the illiterates, repairing roads, guiding them about environmental health, and so on

> The society now is so complex, and many people just care about themselves, especially the young. Now, families have fewer children than before, many families just have one child, and the child becomes the centre of the family, having all privileges, and it's easy for them to become selfish. Many of them don't care about other people and have no feeling towards others' sufferings. So these activities are practical ethical lessons for them to form their better characters. (Dr. Hung)

However, as separated from the academic assessment of student learning, the results of this form of assessment were mainly used to classify students at the end of each academic year and offer them scholarships. Thus, this form of assessment was not paid enough attention by both lecturers and students, as it did not have an important role to play, compared with academic assessment activities. Thao, a Sociology student, explained:

> In this *Holistic Assessment*, our academic results is also the main factor, and other activities are extra, so I think we take part in those community or school activities because they are meaningful and fun for us, not because of the assessment.

In addition to the implementation of the HASS, attempts to integrate citizenship education into the teaching and learning process could be seen more in the Sociology department. Three Sociologists emphasised building up students' expansive attributes. Ms Yen stated:

> I want my students to be good people in society with behaviours that are full of humanities. It means that they behave and treat other people well, have behaviours of well-educated and civilised people. Our specialisation is social sciences and humanities, so it will be very sad if students' behaviours lack humanities.

Thus, these things were integrated into the sessions of her courses – *Social Statistics* and *Introduction to Sociology*. Interestingly, the needs for life skills originated from her own experience as a student:

> When I was a student, nobody taught me life skills in order to be a better and more mature person. Students now have better conditions than us in the old days, but they do things according to their instincts more than using taught skills. As a person who has more experience than them, I want to

> help them in some way. So I think in addition to teaching them academic knowledge and skills, we need to guide them to have proper behaviours, to treat others well, and so on. These are very necessary for their lives.

Similarly, Mr. Tan integrated into his *Introduction to Sociology* course social interaction and communication, which he wanted students to form because, as he explained: 'Students are still weak at life skills, especially basic social interactions, and are not self-aware of social customs. So they should be equipped with these skills in order to better behave in different work and life situations.' Likewise, in *Gender Sociology*, Ms Huong also taught her students how to deal with their own problems if they might arise.

Therefore, developing students' expansive attributes to function well as good citizens in society seemed to play an essential role in the teaching and learning activities of the Sociology department. Differently, it was not mentioned by the English lecturers in the interviews. It might be because the English department focused more on equipping students with language proficiency and skills for employability; consequently citizenship education might not be treated as a priority. Thus, it could be argued that Sociology better prepared students with expansive graduate attributes than English. The next section will be about the peer feedback intervention implemented in the English department as a response to one of the features of Boud's framework – *developing informed judgement* – in order to see whether a very Western practice could actually work in a far different context like Vietnam.

7.6 A peer feedback intervention

The analysis of the peer feedback intervention in *Critical Thinking 1* – a course for 25 second-year students of the English honours programme[12] – was based on these four sources of data: students' feedback on their peer's essay, students' qualitative questionnaire, the interview with Dr. Lam, and the student focus group interview. In this section, I argue that although peer feedback is still unfamiliar in the culture of assessment in Vietnamese HE, there are important things to learn from it. I also argue that this intervention can play a useful role in forming students' abilities of peer judgement and self-reflection, which may lead to peer and self-development and can be essential to their learning both at university and after graduation.

In general, the approach could play an important role in supporting student learning, as Dr. Lam remarked:

> In this course, we encourage the students to think critically and creatively. We encourage them to critique, to question whatever sounds illogical to them and try to explain why, so this task allows the students to have a chance to look at their peers' papers, those who are more or less like theirs, to evaluate and give comments to improve these papers…And I give them my feedback on their peer feedback. The students also have a chance to look at it again to see if they've given and been given good, negative or positive, objective, appropriate feedback or not. I believe it is a multiple way, not only the two ways feedback. So hopefully, this task helps them to sharpen their evaluation skills in a constructive and critical way, and it's important to student learning.

For Dr. Lam, when doing the task, students learned from giving and receiving critical and constructive feedback. Nevertheless, how critical and constructive

[12] In Vietnamese HE, honour programmes are for top students who achieved high marks in the entrance exam. These students have to take another exam to be selected to attend this programme. Students study more specific courses with high-level of performance than students of other programmes. The honour programmes aim at nurturing and developing talented graduates for the country.

was the peer feedback? Which capacities could it help students to form, and how did they support student learning?

7.6.1 The practice of giving constructive and critical feedback

The students had experienced peer assessment in their first and second year writing courses; however, there was no written guideline on how to give feedback, and what they previously did was mainly correcting mistakes rather than commenting on what was good about the paper and what needed to be improved. Thus, the guidelines on how to give peer feedback provided them with the basis for understanding and writing critical feedback in a positive way:

> In this task, we have the guidelines, so we also look at the arguments, comment on the strong points and weak points, and we know how to critique positively as well. (Lan)

> We can improve our skills of making judgement when using the guidelines to give comments on our friend's work. (Dao)

Following these guidelines, students could point out strengths and weaknesses of their peer's work, but at the same time avoid using negative or offensive comments. Although there were still a few apparently strong remarks, such as '*I don't understand what you mean*', '*Your example is not quite appropriate*', or '*You didn't summarise your main points*', most criticism seemed to be constructive and encouraging, as well as clear, rich and elaborate in nature. For each essay, students not only gave detailed feedback on vocabulary, grammar and sentence structures but also holistic feedback on the organizations, arguments, and supporting ideas, as illustrated in Table 7.5.

Table 7.5 Examples of students' peer feedback

Feedback on the essay as a whole and on arguments or main ideas	'Your essay is clear and well-organised, and your hand-writing is beautiful.' 'I think your essay is well-structured. The problem is just some grammatical mistakes' 'Your main points are easy to understand and the supporting examples are quite interesting.' 'Your ideas are interesting, but the use of words seems not easy for me to understand.' 'Your first argument is clear and convincing, but the second seems to be unclear because it lacks evidence, and the last sentence in the conclusion is irrelevant because it opens a new topic.' 'I think the first two arguments are relatively strong, but the last needs more support (for example: What are the benefits of balancing our lives?). However, in general, this essay is quite convincing.' 'This argument seems to be invalid. I think the premises do not support the conclusion that successful young people have to succeed in their career because these do not explain why they should have successful career. This essay is easy to understand, but I still feel that it is not convincing and argumentative enough.' 'You did include examples to support the first and the second points, but there is none in the last point. Do you think it needs to be explained more?'
Feedback on supporting ideas	'I like the way you explain the importance of self-confidence at school, work, and in society. However, it would be perfect if you explain more how self-confidence can lead to a young person's success.' 'This idea is good, but I think you should explain the reasons why you think a successful person has to be like that.' 'Here, it would be more convincing if you gave an example of how a successful person overcomes difficulties.' 'Have you thought about giving any evidence to support this argument to make it more vivid? ' 'I think these two sentences do not support the topic sentence.'
Feedback on vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure	'"Enjoying *his* life" seems to be male-biased. Should it be "enjoying *their* lives"?' '"*Helping others*" is not related to "*self-confidence*", I think.' 'I find it hard to understand the relationship between the two clauses of the last sentence. What is the connection between "*having achieved…get it*" and "*active, optimistic and self-confident*"? 'I suggest you make use of connectors to make your essay more coherent.' 'I think this should be "*among*" rather than "*between*" 'Should it be the simple present instead of the simple past here?'

Here, students effectively applied discourse strategies recommended in the guidelines to make their feedback constructive and simultaneously critical. They were able to encourage their classmates by using words or phrases complimenting on the strengths of the essay, such as '*clear*', *'well-organised', 'interesting', 'convincing'* or *'I like the way you…'*. They strategically commented on the good points before identifying what needed to be improved, as well as give reasons for their judgement. For example, *'Your first argument is clear and convincing, but the second seems to be unclear because it lacks evidence…'*. They also suggested suitable ways to improve the paper – adding more evidence, explanations, or examples, and make their criticism more positive with these deferential phrases: *'should it be…', 'I suggest…', 'do you think…', 'have you thought about…', 'it would be more convincing if…'*, and so on.

Most questionnaire respondents (22 out of 25) and all five focus group students believed that such constructive and critical feedback was very helpful for them. It supported them to build up necessary capacities to their present and future learning; perhaps the most important were *the ability to make judgement* and *reflexivity*, which are also the focus of Boud's framework of *sustainable assessment.* Among its four key features, while there was less evidence of the first – *being sustainable* and the fourth – *forming the becoming practitioner*, the other two – *developing informed judgement* and *constructing reflexive learners* – could be strongly seen to be happening in the intervention.

7.6.2 The peer feedback intervention in developing 'informed judgement' and constructing 'reflexive learners'

'Informed judgement' refers to informing both others' judgement and students' self- assessment, in which self-assessment is at the core, and 'reflexive leaners' means learners who are actively engaged in assessment, 'proactive', 'generative', and are able to self-reflect and self-regulate (Boud 2007, 2010a). In this intervention, these features were interrelated, and although it was not a self-assessment task, it created a lot of a lot of spaces for students to be informed about others' judgement on their work and, through this, to self-reflect and self-assess in order to improve their learning. For most students, their peers' feedback helped them know about their strengths and recognise their weaknesses, as well as rethink and try to improve themselves:

> Because *Critical Thinking* is a new course to us, so with my friend's and lecturer's feedback, we can adjust our way of writing to be more logical and argumentative, so I think their feedback is very useful. (Lan)

> I think my friends give comments on my paper very carefully not only on language use, but also on the way I make arguments, and they also have some recommendations for us. Thanks to their comments, I realize that way I express my ideas makes other people difficult to understand. The lecturer can understand what I write, but my friends don't, so it helps me to reconsider and adjust the way I use words and express my ideas. (Long)

When reading their peer's work, students simultaneously learned from many things from it, as well as reflected upon and improved their own:

> I like this peer feedback task because it helps me learn many new things, such as ideas, word usage, writing style, and so on… from friends and reflect and improve our own. (Chau)

> It not only helps me to learn from my friends, but when I write feedback to them, I also learn how to write it in a constructive, positive and objective way. (Duong)

Clearly, the intervention provided not only grounds for the practice of giving and receiving peer-feedback but also good opportunities to learn: learning to be critical and constructive, learning from others' judgement and judging others, from both weaknesses and strengths of others, as well as learning by self-reflection and self- assessment. Such learning helped them to shape and develop their assessment abilities. As Dr. Lam put it:

> For me, peer feedback will help the students to become evaluators of others' work, and in doing so, later on they may become their own evaluators of their own work. So, I believe that peer feedback is not only useful for their peers but also for themselves. It brings more reflection, it requires students to think deeper, to be more profound, and at least, it gives the students a very good chance to give and receive feedback from their peer and me so that they can improve their paper.

Thus, it was obvious that when tailored and localised, this peer feedback intervention proved to be an appropriate and effective practice in that it encouraged students to think deeply, critically and reflexively and form their capabilities for peer assessment and self-assessment. In other words, it supported students' development of '*informed judgement*' and the construction of '*reflexive learners*', which are the key features of Boud's framework. However, some issues arose during the implementation process due to the tension between innovative practice and conventional assumptions in the Vietnamese teaching and learning culture.

7.6.3 Students' interests in peer feedback versus their concerns about accuracy

In addition, the task could attract students' interests and engagement. Most students liked this activity and shared similar opinions, such as '*This task is very fun'; 'There's nothing that I don't like. It's quite interesting to me'; 'I really like it because I learn a lot from it'; 'Looking at how others view the* *issues from a different stance is quite interesting*'; and so on. Likewise, Dr. Lam confirmed that:

> It is fun, and I believe students are very responsive and interactive when they read their peers' papers to give feedback. I don't think that there is any personal problem or relationship or peer pressure among the students. I think they are very open-minded. At the beginning of the course, I told them that when they took the course, it meant that we were open to giving and receiving critiques, and they welcome such a chance.

However, they were very concerned about the accuracy of their feedback because it was given in English, a foreign language rather than their mother tongue. Around half of the students were uncertain and worried about the accuracy of their feedback, thus the task seemed to be challenging for them:

> It's hard to assess other students' performance when they're at the same level as I am because others' mistakes can also be my own, so it's hard to detect them. Also, I may not have enough knowledge and abilities to give comments, for example, knowledge of grammar, of particular field, lack of vocabulary, so I found it difficult. (Hien)

> I see some vague ideas in my friend's writing, but I don't know how to give suggestions to make the ideas clearer because I'm afraid if I change them, the ideas will be different and they won't be connected with other ideas in the passage. (Phung)

Clearly, students encountered some difficulties when carrying out the task, yet at the same time, they took it seriously in thinking deeply and independently about how to give feedback, and seemed to be very responsible for what they were doing. Also, although the feedback was sometimes inaccurate, it encouraged deep thinking:

> We are not completely sure if we did it accurately, but at least it can show how we think of others' works. (Mai)

> Perhaps not all comments are correct but I still can learn how others think about my points. (Tu)

Therefore, although limitations in students' knowledge and language competence might lead to a few cases of inaccurate feedback, it did not seriously affect those who receive feedback because they were able to figure out what was wrong about it:

> In my paper, I wrote things grammatically correct, but my friend thought they were wrong, so he corrected them and made them wrong, but it's OK because I know it. (Long)
>
> My friend corrects my language use exactly, but he understands the way I expresses my ideas differently from me, like I want to go East and he wants to go West, so our ideas can't meet. (Phung)

However, for Dr. Lam, although the criteria have been explained clearly to the students before the task, this did not guarantee that all students applied them equally, or appropriately or accurately because it also depended on their language competence. Thus, inaccuracy and variation were natural and acceptable during the learning process. He also believed that students were somehow competent enough to understand and identify the mistakes, except for a few cases:

> They can learn from their friends' mistakes because when they say they can identify the mistakes, it means that they… probably, to some extent, they're competent enough to understand why these are mistakes. However, there's also one situation. After the students give feedback to their peer, I return the papers to the original writers, and one student asked me: 'Am I correct in this part? Why did I receive this comment from my peer? I doubt that this comment is wrong'. Then, I have to be the mediator and explain it to them.

Since students' concerns about accuracy were inevitable when they were not native speakers of the English language, one might argue that the focus should not be on whether students' feedback is right or wrong. This might lead to students' fear of giving wrong feedback, and they would concentrate on trying to get it right. It could unintentionally shift the emphasis from other more important aspects of feedback – bringing them opportunities to practise being more critical, independent, and autonomous in their learning – into accuracy.

The fear of inaccuracy might also make them less confident in their feedback and more dependent on the lecturer, which could consequently create a tension between students' autonomy and the lecturer's control.

7.6.4 Tension between students' autonomy and the lecturer's control

The practice of peer feedback could enable students to become critical and autonomous learners who had their own opinions and judgement about others' works. However, Vietnamese students get used to depending on lecturers with a conventional assumption that lecturers are always right, and they do not often question or have different opinions from their lecturers. Thus, when applied in the Vietnamese HE context, this peer feedback task helped develop students' critical and independent thinking, which could be one of the steps to move away from the teacher-centred tradition and bring about more students' autonomy. As above-mentioned, the majority of students showed a lot of interest and appreciation for their peer's feedback. Among them, six questionnaire respondents and four focus-group students even preferred it to the lecturer's:

> I feel more comfortable because my paper is assessed by my classmates, not by my lecturer. My friends have the same level of education, so they use simpler terms and easier for me to understand because sometimes, the lecturer uses too academic terms, and this makes us difficult to understand. (Ngoc)
>
> I think my friends' feedback is more detailed than the lecturer, sometimes, too detailed because the lecturer gives feedback to a lot of us, so he just focuses on the main points and give general feedback. (Ly)

These beliefs might initiate not only from the facts that students were at the same age or level of education and that the lecturer's use of words was sometimes more difficult for them to understand or he had less time for detailed feedback, but also from the traditional lecturer-student power relations in the classroom. Accordingly, there is a conventionally formal relationship that creates a distance between lecturers and students; meanwhile students are closer to each other. Thus, these students might want to resist the lecturer's control and be more independent, which was reflected through the fact some of them felt less comfortable with their lecturer's feedback and welcomed their peer's feedback more.

However, in a culture of assessment where lecturers are the only assessors in Vietnamese HE, such willingness to be independent and autonomous is considered as innovative and may clash with traditional assumptions. While many students were willing and trying to be autonomous, the lecturer and a few students, to some extent, still wanted to maintain his traditional role as controller. For three questionnaire respondents, the peer-feedback task was 'a waste of time' because they believed that 'assessing the students is the job of the lecturer'. This might be because they got used to the fact that only the lecturer assessed, gave marks and feedback to the students. Having been 'moulded' as passive learners for a long time, perhaps these students felt secure in this role and consequently refused to take a new role as active assessors, even when they had an opportunity to do so. In addition, the habit of being dependent on the lecturer could be seen when two focus group students needed the lecturer to be around to help them:

> We also need the lecturer to move around and give us some hints, and if we have any difficulty, we can ask him, of course, not to control, but to guide us. (Ly)

> We need the lecturer there so that we can ask questions because sometimes, there are some problems in the paper that go beyond our understanding. (Quy)

In contrast, this opinion was protested by Long that if the lecturer was there and gave his opinion, their feedback would be affected by it and this reduced their chance to work independently and be responsible for their own critiques. Also, although Dr. Lam wanted to build up students' critical and independent thinking, his willingness to control, to some extent, was shown through the way he influenced students when monitoring the activity and giving feedback to their feedback:

> I think the lecturer's role is important. I do not let them give the peer feedback at home because when they do it in class, I walk around to help them if they have any difficulties or questions, especially those related to how they interpret the criteria. The lecturer should be a facilitator or mediator in class and the evaluator of the evaluator looking at both the original writing and the peer feedback….Without the lecturer's role as a mediator, the peer feedback may be useless because the students may be disappointed or unsure about their peer's feedback.

In fact, giving students more support when acting as a facilitator in class could help them to construct better feedback. Yet, the lecturer seemed to emphasise the importance of his role in the task, and thus his influence might limit students' independent thinking. Although the lecturer accepted inaccuracy and variation in students' feedback and confirmed that he was a facilitator or mediator, he still focused more on accuracy and turned into a controller when giving his own feedback on students writing and acting as 'evaluator of the evaluator' – giving feedback on students' peer feedback. In fact, his main purpose was to offer them more help; however, it was a peer feedback task, thus this role of the lecturer seemed to be dominant and not very appropriate. Also, the more he participated in the activity, the less autonomy students might have. Arguably, the lecturer should teach them to be better in giving feedback by encouraging them to be confident, advising them not to put too much emphasis on inaccuracy but consider it natural during the learning process, as well as leaving them more spaces to think and do the task independently rather than being much involved to ensure that their feedback was accurate.

Therefore, instead of focusing on accuracy, errors, or separate parts of their peers' work, students should be trained to look at it holistically. Assessing students' work holistically is also highlighted in Sadler's (2009) work in which he uses the two terms 'holistic grading' and 'analytic grading' to refer to 'appraising student works as integrated entities' and 'criterion-by-criterion judgement', respectively (ibid.: 48). Sadler points out weaknesses of analytic grading, and among them is a lack of compatibility between 'global impressions' of the quality of students' work and 'the outcomes produced by conscientious implementation of the analytic grading scheme' (ibid.: 53). Thus, he argues that students should practise making holistic rather than analytic judgement. He also emphasises the need to build up students' judgement ability similar to that of their teachers. Similarly, Boud (2009) also suggests forming students' capacity to choose suitable standards in order to judge their own work or others' work appropriately. What Boud and Sadler suggest may be helpful for the teacher and students in this peer feedback intervention in terms of reflecting on and adjusting their practices for better support students to develop their ability of making judgement in future.

To sum up, in spite of its limitations, the intervention definitely helped improve student learning in this course. However, because this is the first time the peer-feedback task has been implemented at the HCMU, it is necessary to consider some changes and conditions for future implementations.

7.6.5 Adjustments and conditions for future implementations

In addition to letting students have more autonomy during the peer feedback process, some conditions needed to be met for wider and more effective future implementations, especially in other programmes. For Dr. Lam, as the task was important to the improvement of student learning, he would continue doing it in the future in this honour programme because there are fewer students (25 in this course) and it got more support from the university management level than the general ones. However, if applied in the general ones, classes should be small, and lecturers needed to be trained, encouraged, and supported to implement it since peer feedback was still unfamiliar to the Vietnamese HE context. As Dr. Lam remarked:

> One difficulty is the size of the class. For bigger class, like 50 students, especially the general ones, it will be much more difficult, and we will fail to apply it not only because the class is too crowded, we don't have time to give comments on all these papers, but also because the variety of the students' language ability may be much wider. The second one is we have to train lecturers. However, although we train them, it doesn't mean that all lecturers are inspirational and motivational enough to encourage the students to do well in the task.

Similarly, the students were not familiar with the criteria in the guidelines because it was the first time they did peer feedback against criteria in a constructive and critical way. Although they understood them clearly, they still encountered some difficulties when using them:

> The lecturer explained them carefully before we did the task, so we understand them quite clearly. I see one thing difficult in that: '*new idea*', but only we have enough knowledge and experience do we know if the idea is new, or '*creative*', and I don't know how much creativity is needed to be considered as '*creative*'. (Lan)

> I understand them completely, but understanding is one thing, and following them is another. Of course our knowledge and experience is not like the lecturer, so sometimes we don't have enough knowledge to give our friends good comments like our lecturers. (Quy)

Therefore, most students needed more examples from the lecturer in order to understand how to judge a piece of writing using these criteria and more practice to get used to the task in order to do it better. They also suggested writing the essay at home to have more time to write it carefully so that their friends could understand it more easily and give better feedback. In addition, all focus group students wanted more peer dialogue as they believed it would be more effective to sit with the writer during the process and have further face-to-face discussion in order to avoid misunderstanding of his or her ideas, as well as ask questions and get explanations when necessary:

> Because we don't meet face-to-face, I feel I lack something when giving feedback. Sometimes, when I read the paper, I just want to meet the author face-to-face to ask if I understand his/her ideas correctly, or if it is what he/she wants to express so that I can give more accurate and effective feedback. (Phung)

Essentially, some wished to have more peer assessors to get feedback from different perspectives so that they could receive various ideas to improve their work. Also, both the lecturer and students wanted more time to revise their paper and further discuss it with the peer assessor:

> I don't know if it's possible, but I'd like two people giving feedback on one piece of writing so that we can get different sources of ideas and more ideas to improve our work. Also sometimes, feedback from the first friend can be too subjective or inaccurate, so feedback from the second friend may help balance it. (Phung)

> If the time allowed, I would give the students another chance to revise their paper and go back to the peer evaluator to exchange ideas. That's just what I think, but I couldn't apply it yet because of time constraint. So, I think if we teach writing, it'll be much better to give the students more time or another chance to revise their paper based on their peer's and the lecturer's feedback. (Dr. Lam)

In brief, this peer feedback intervention was a micro example of how peer feedback could help improve student learning in a different context where assessment was traditionally exam-based and feedback were given only by lecturers. I found that:

(i) Through the practice of giving constructive and critical feedback, the intervention definitely provided students with opportunities to form capacities for peer assessment, self-reflection and self-assessment. Essentially, deep, critical, and independent thinking was developed during this formation process.

(ii) Students were interested and engaged in the tasks; however, they were also concerned about the accuracy of peer feedback.

(iii) There was a tension between students' autonomy and the lecturer's control during the feedback process.

(iv) Although some conditions and changes should be taken into consideration for future implementations, this intervention proved to be an appropriate and helpful practice for students to improve their learning.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has investigated assessment policy and practices in English and Sociology departments of the HCMU. The regime was exam-dominated with the integration of borrowed international assessment perspectives and practices. Assessment in English seemed to be more continuous and reformed, with stronger international borrowing and influences than Sociology, yet Sociology seemed to better prepare students with expansive graduate attributes that emphasised communal and collective values than English. Both departments encountered many constraints in the change process. Essentially, lecturers' commitment to innovation and their dissatisfaction with the centralised system could provide the impetus for reform. There were lessons to be learned from developments in the West provided these were adopted and contextualised for Vietnam, as illustrated in the peer feedback intervention. Applying and adopting Boud's framework critically provides a useful tool to do this.

These findings also showed that although the Vietnamese lecturers applied borrowed international assessment methods, assessment at HCMU were different from MU in several ways, among them were: (i) the MU's assessment regime was tightly controlled and driven by neoliberal policy, quality assurance, the NSS, yet simultaneously providing flexibility for applying innovative assessment methods, (ii) the focus on the 'self' rather than collective values, and (iii) the lecturers' emphasis on formative assessment and feedback. The comparison between the UK and Vietnamese cases will be discussed in chapter nine. In the following chapter, Boud's framework of sustainable assessment will be operationalised for the Vietnamese case.

8 Chapter eight: Operationalising Boud's framework for the HCMU

8.1 Introduction

Assessment in the Vietnamese case has been characterised as a centralised regime dominated by exams, accompanied by initial innovation using the strategic borrowing of international perspectives and practices, with lecturers' commitment to change, and various constraints. It was also appropriate for peer feedback as long as some conditions were met. These key points have been made in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will consider the elements of Boud's Western-generated framework to be found in the assessment practices of the Vietnamese case, especially through the alternative assessment methods applied by the lecturers in their own courses. Among eight elements in Boud's framework, there seems to be no evidence of *students design assessments*. The other seven elements can be found in the data, and because some elements are closely connected, they will be combined into five in the analysis, including: *(i) engaging students and working with peers, (ii) integrative and authentic activities, (iii) learning and judgement, (iv) modelling and practice,* and *(v) giving and receiving feedback*.

I will argue that although most elements of Boud's framework were present in the assessment practices of both departments, more evidence of this framework could be seen in the practices of English lecturers than Sociology. Also, these international assessment methods were 'Vietnamised', thus they could have different features. However, in general, assessment at these two departments still showed a weak and incomplete assessment-for-LLL framework.

8.2 Engaging students and working with peers

The data showed strong evidence of most lecturers trying to engage students in group learning and assessment activities. In the English department, Dr. Mai used group presentations in her *Literature* course and Ms. Chi applied both group presentations and group mini-projects in her *Translation* course. Likewise, in Sociology, they were also applied by Dr. Hoa in *Research Methodology* and Ms. Huong in *Gender Sociology*; and in-class group exercises were employed in Ms. Yen's *Social Statistics*. However, although the lecturers and students of the two departments shared some similarities in their perspectives and practices in group work, there were also distinctive differences between them.

8.2.1 Using group work to improve student learning and engagement

Generally, most lecturers had similar ideas on the benefits of group work, especially group presentation. They believed that it helped students learn from peers and develop essential skills to their future lives:

> When working in groups, students can learn from each other because somebody's weak points can be the others' strong points. I also want them to practise and improve their presentation skills and to form the skill of questioning, discussing, debating and convincing the audience. These are necessary for them in their work and lives later. (Ms. Chi – English)

Group work has recently been emphasised in learning and assessment activities in both departments since the implementation of the credit system at the HCMU in 2007. However, it was used more in assessment in English than Sociology, as Dr. Hoa (Sociology) remarked:

> For the past three years, most courses require students to do group work, like group presentations or group mini-projects. So this encourages students to learn together with their friends. They form learning groups to study outside the classroom, and students who don't take part in those groups tend to out themselves as outsiders, and we can see that very clearly because their marks tend to be lower than others.

In addition to equipping students with necessary life skills, the lecturers also used group work to get students more engaged in choosing their own topics within the course content. For them, students would become more interested and may perform the tasks better if they had such autonomy:

> Each student has their own strengths and interests. So, I let them choose what they like so that they'll be interested more in the task, and when they're interested, they may do it better. Also, the midterm and final exams are obligatory topics, so with the portfolio, the students do the assignments at home. If they choose the topic they like, they can search for the documents about it on the Internet or other sources as references, and they'll do it better. (Ms. Phuong – English)

However, English lecturers seemed to be more successful in using group work to engage students and help them to form important capacities. For Dr. Mai, 'students really enjoy it and they are eager to take part in the activities'. Most English students shared similar ideas with their lecturers that they liked group work for these reasons:

> With group presentations, we can improve our speaking skills in public, like in front of the class, and it's a big advantage for us in using the English language. I can't always have a good group, but if I have a group of friends that I usually work with, we can work very effectively and learn from each other. (Kien)

> Group projects are interesting. There are many tasks to do, so it requires group members to share the tasks. For example, when we do a project, we need to interview, to do survey, so we need active members, and then, after collecting data, we need other members who are good at writing to write reports. So in a group, we can co-operate and help each other. (Huy)

Although recognizing the advantages, two students were also concerned about their quality when these forms of assessment were over-used. Huy said:

> I think the lecturers should discuss with each other to balance the tasks. Now a lot of courses require us to do group presentations or projects. When a lot of assessment tasks appear at the same time, like assignments, project, presentation, midterm, end of term exam, and so on, this makes us just do them to escape from them in order to do the next, so it will badly affect the quality of our work.

In addition, three students complained about the problems that they encounter. For example, many students did not read the topic in advance and thus could not take part in the discussion, or were disengaged with the task, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Disagreement and debates among group members occasionally happened; nonetheless, most students believed these could help them learn and come up with new ideas. Therefore, all English students confirmed that group presentations were a good way for them to improve their oral communication skills. Similarly, their Sociology peers also recognised the usefulness of group work. Nonetheless, most of them were not in favour of group presentations due to unfairness and inaccuracy, especially when they were asked to mark their group members' contribution or other groups' presentations:

> We are close friends, so we don't want to give them bad marks even though they do little or nothing. So, our marking for peers isn't very exact. (Thao)

> Sometimes, people just give high marks to the group with eye-catching presentations, or presentations that can attract other people's attention, and there are groups with good content, but their presentations are not attractive enough, they get lower marks from their peers, and I think it's unfair. (Lan)

Instead, four students preferred doing group mini-projects; however, they suggested that it would be fairer if lecturers could ask each group member to write about the presentation topic individually to be marked with the oral presentation.

Thus, it seemed that the level of student engagement in group work in Sociology was not as great as in English. For Dr. Hoa, group presentations were not as effective as she had expected. Perhaps one of the reasons could be class sizes, as mentioned earlier. Learning language skills requires small-sized classes; thus, in the English department, although classes were still crowded, they were much smaller than Sociology. Another reason might lie in culture, which made the assessment of group work problematic, as Dr. Hoa explained:

> Vietnamese students, because of our culture that highlights community and communal protection, so students tend to accept those who do nothing into the group. Even though I always emphasise that all members have to participate in group activities, if somebody doesn't do anything and the group don't report that to me, I won't know and can't check that.

However, because of the above-mentioned values that group work brought about to students, these lecturers were also committed to apply those tasks in spite of many difficulties. As Ms Huong maintained, 'It's better do something rather than nothing at all.' In addition to getting the students engaged in group work, the lecturers were also trying to build up students' autonomy, together with collectivity in group work.

8.2.2 Integrating students' autonomy and collectivity

Explaining the reasons for using group work, the Sociology lecturers focused on preparing students for being a part of a community and providing students with opportunities to practise working and communicating with others. Dr. Hoa explained:

> As I always tell my student, we belong to a social community, so we must know how to interact and co-operate with other people. Of course more people's minds are better than one. Although you're an excellent individual, without other people, you can't shine. Also, one of the most distinctive features of sociology is to explore the relationships among different social communities, so group work is also a kind of practice for them: to work with other people, observe, interact with others, then reflect on themselves in order to work more effectively and to live better in a community.

Here, the Sociologists and English had different emphases on what they wanted their students to be. The Sociologists focused on students' ability to live well in a community, which might originate from Vietnamese social values that highlight collectivity rather than individuality. Meanwhile, the English specialists focused on the autonomous individual, and tried to equip students with both collectivity and autonomy. Although they wanted the students to develop team working ability, they also considered students' becoming independent and responsible learners:

> I want them to build up their collaborative skills when they discuss the topic together and interact with each other, and at the same time each member will be responsible for the part he or she presents. (Dr. Mai)

> Through group work, I also want students to have autonomy in learning. It's up to them to translate the texts in their own ways, as long as they can convince the class that their translation is appropriate. I also want them argue for their own viewpoints. I don't want them to always agree with what others talk about. Inquiry is important to learning because the more they ask, the more they learn. And also in their life later, they must be themselves, have their own points of view. (Ms. Chi)

Arguably, for the English lecturers, students' being collaborative and autonomous might not be contradictory but supplementary to each other. That is, being independent and responsible for their own learning could support students to work well in a team:

> In group presentations, the students will form the presentation skills: the ability to speak in public, debate, and argue for their own viewpoints, as well as convince other people. In order to do so, they must have the ability

> to do research, to read books, that is, self-learning. They also need to be responsible for their own part and have their own ideas so that they can make good contribution to their group's work. (Ms. Chi – English)

8.2.3 Tension between traditional and modern lecturer – student power relations

In the English department, due to international influences, there were concerns about whether traditional power relations between lecturer and student in which lecturers acted as controllers should be maintained. Dr. Mai remarked:

> I feel difficult sometimes because in Western culture, if the lecturers act as controllers, it's not good, but in Vietnam, if we let the students have a lot of freedom, they may not learn anything because students who work hard may feel that they work hard for nothing, so they don't want to study anymore, then it'll have a reverse and negative effect.

For this reason, in the group presentation sessions, Dr. Mai asked questions to check if the students listened and understood their peers' presentations. She believed this might be helpful for their learning. She explained that:

> My questions after each group presentation seem to be dominant, but if I didn't do so, not many students would listen to the presentations; they may do or think about something else. Also, most Vietnamese students have the habit of learning only what they are taught, and if you don't push them, they won't learn, and the good students are good, but the others are still bad, so they need to be pushed to learn. If we didn't do so, they wouldn't have basic knowledge and skills when they graduate.

Obviously, this willingness to control and 'force' students to learn did not seem to originate from the lecturer's desire to exercise her power over students, but from her worries and concerns about students' future. However, Ms Chi's perspective on teacher-student power relations seemed to be less dominant in that she did not attempt to control the students:

> When students present their translation pieces, I want them to talk about what they think first; then I'm just the final person who summarises and

> suggests what they need to improve. I just want to be the facilitator to help them in their learning, not the controller.

This seemed to be influenced by international student-centred perspectives and a move away from Vietnamese teacher-centred pedagogy in which the teacher controlled the class, students did what the teacher said, as well as challenging the traditional assumption that teachers were always correct. The most important goal, to lecturers in the English department, was to get students engaged in these tasks, and using assessment tasks as learning tasks in order to improve student learning and help them develop necessary abilities for their future life: searching, synthesising information, team working, and taking responsibility for what they did.

In brief, lecturers and students in both departments shared some similarities and differences about the perspective and practices of group work to learn and form LLL capacities. However, it seemed that English lecturers gained more success in engaging students in the activities than their Sociology colleagues due to smaller class sizes and more experience and influences of international perspectives and practices. This could help explain why English students were more interested in group presentations than Sociology students. The next section will discuss other elements of Boud's framework in order to find out the answer to the question: To what extent were the assessment activities at the two departments integrative and authentic?

8.3 Integrative and authentic activities

In terms of integrative activities, most lecturers believed that their assessment tasks were closely linked with each other and with their course objectives. However, they were not sure if and how these tasks were related to the whole programme outcomes because these outcomes had just been built recently and were still being adjusted. As Dr. Kim, the University's Head of Assessment remarked:

> Our university has required all departments to establish and announce expected learning outcomes, but I think the University needs to reconsider and adjust them. They're required to map out a matrix guided by the Asian University Network Quality Assurance (AUN QA) to show the link between their courses, and these expected learning outcomes, like the foundation and core courses and which learning outcomes they aim at, how they are related to these learning outcomes, but so far, no department has done it. Instead, they just describe the expected learning outcomes. So I wonder on what basis they have decided the courses in their programmes, but not on those expected learning outcomes, so these are their initial efforts and still need a lot of revision.

Thus, the connection between the lecturers' assessment tasks and the whole programme outcomes were still vague. The next section will discuss issues of authenticity and employability.

8.3.1 Authentic activities for employability in the English department

Both departments were trying to develop their curriculum and assessment tasks to be more real-life oriented; however, English seemed to do it better than Sociology. The data from *English and Sociology Student Survey Reports* in the first semester of the academic year 2009–2010 show that the level of authenticity of course contents in the English department was much higher than Sociology. English students in the survey rated 52.5% very good and 29% good for the authenticity of course contents (HCMU's English

Department 2010b), whereas in Sociology 33.9% very good and 29.2% good, respectively (HCMU's Sociology Department 2010b).

The English department has made important changes in its curriculum. Previously, there was only one major in the department – English Linguistics and Literature; however, when transferring to the credit system in 2007, the curriculum was divided into three majors – *Culture and Literature; Translation and Interpretation*; and *Linguistics and Language Teaching* – with interrelated and transferable knowledge and skills and more employment-oriented goals in order to respond to the requirements of the labour market:

> Our graduates can do jobs related to translation–interpretation, teaching English or jobs related to communicating with foreigners. We will make some changes because when they go to work, after a while, some of them may feel that their majors may not suitable for their jobs. So, in addition to *Core courses* for each major, all students take *General courses* – language skills and then *Foundation courses*, like *Teaching Methodology, Translation Strategies,* and so on. They provide the students with basic transferable knowledge and skills to do other jobs different from their own major. (Dr. Mai)

Essentially, all English lecturers showed strong commitment to equip students with authentic knowledge and skills for employability. Ms. Phuong states that:

> Because learning is for employment later after graduation; therefore, students should be equipped with not only the knowledge, but also other skills for their future jobs. These skills include: searching for, organizing, analysing the information and so on. These are necessary for the students after graduation. In general, they are to prepare the students for life outside the university. Studying at the university is only one small part of a person's life.

With this strongly employment-focused perspective, these lecturers tried to make the teaching, learning, and assessment activities more authentic. For example, Ms Chi was committed to preparing students for their work life after university by using employment-oriented assessment tasks for students to practice and develop their translation and interpretation skills. In one session of her *Interpretation* course, she invited an international lecturer to talk to the class, and students interpreted what he was saying. For her, students need to practise as real interpreters in real life situations, and this was appreciated by her students:

> The students like it a lot because they say that they can listen to a foreigner and interpret directly, not through a video, so they can form a very quick interpretation reaction. With a video, if they can't catch up with what the people say in the video, the lecturer can rewind it, otherwise they can't interpret it. However, with a foreigner in the classroom, they have to concentrate on what that person says, because he/she just says it once, without repeating it. So, this helps students improve memorization and concentration, two very important skills for interpretation.

In the group mini-project of her *Translation* course, students were required to translate online articles from the BBC, VOA or Vietnam news. Her purpose was for students to get used to business terms, which helped prepare them for their future jobs. What she did initiated from her own experience as a student, as she explained:

> I don't want my students to start learning from the beginning again when they go to work like myself previously. If they just translated stories or literary works, they wouldn't be equipped with enough knowledge and skills for their jobs later. For example, if they are asked to translate a contract or articles on the global economy and so on, then they don't know how to translate them. That's why I choose update articles with topics related to their future jobs because I want to prepare them for these jobs, and this will reduce their time on learning and adjusting themselves to be able to do the jobs. Instead they can spend time on learning other skills necessary for their jobs as well.

Three other lecturers in the interviews also shared similar opinions with Ms. Chi. When teaching *Academic Writing*, Dr. Lam and Ms. Phuong asked the students to write about what happened around them, such as student life, culture, jobs, environment and so on in their writing assignments or portfolios. Mr Minh also did the same thing with translation and writing practice exercises.

Most English students agreed that assessment tasks help them to prepare for their future employment. Many had part time jobs related to using the English language while they were still studying. Three in the focus group were working – one as an English teacher for a foreign language centre and the other two for foreign companies. They confirmed that the knowledge and skills they learned are helpful for them at work; however, the curriculum was more beneficial for those who do jobs related to language or teaching, and thus needed to be adjusted:

> We study a lot of Linguistics. If we do jobs like teaching, interpretation, or translation, it is very helpful. However, if we work for a company and do jobs related to business, we are just better than others in language because we lack these kinds of knowledge and skills about business communication. So, we should integrate other specialisations into our courses, like English for Tourism, Business English, and so on. Now we just have Introductory Courses, so we need more courses that go further into these majors because I think they are useful for our jobs later. (Ly)

For most students, the level of authenticity might depend on not only the lecturer's choice of learning and assessment activities but also the features of the course. Some courses were about theoretical issues without real-life applications:

> I think some courses should be dropped from the curriculum. For example, in *Functional Grammar*, we learn about different grammatical approaches,

> but we don't know what they are for, because when we go to work, we don't use such knowledge. (Kim)

However, two English lecturers argued that although the knowledge could not be applied in their future jobs, these courses are very important for language students to reach a proficiency level, even though the job market did not require that much:

> Although these courses are theoretical, they are about linguistics, so they cannot be dropped out of the curriculum. Language students need to learn them in order to understand how the language is structured and formed in order to be competent language users. Our students are required to read documents and books at a high level of language proficiency, but now most employers in Vietnam just require first communications skills. (Mr. Minh)

8.3.2 More focus on social research in Sociology

Meanwhile, in Sociology, there seemed to be less change in the curriculum, except for lecturers' attempts to connect what they taught and assessed to the real world. Similar to their English colleagues, most Sociology lecturers gave students assessment tasks about analysing or solving social problems, or doing a mini social research project on social issues, such as gender equity in the Vietnamese society, family problems, social crimes, rural or urban lives, and so on. However, the evidence of how these lecturers prepared students for future jobs seemed to be less strong. This could be because the Sociology curriculum strongly focused on social research, as stated in the key learning outcomes: 'Sociology graduates will possess general and specialized knowledge of Sociology and social research skills in order to do research or to deal with issues in economics, politics, society, culture, and national security' (Sociology 2009: 19). This focus might reduce students' employment opportunities since there were not many research-related jobs in the market. As Dr. Hung (Dean) remarked:

> Not many students can get suitable jobs for their major because with social sciences and humanities subjects, graduates can do various jobs; however, most jobs related to sociology focus on recruiting postgraduates, so undergraduate students need to take further education.

Apart from the ability to do research, for Ms Huong, students were equipped too general knowledge and skills for a specific job, consequently employers usually have to retrain the graduates if they are recruited. Also, the level of authenticity in many courses was still low:

> Many courses in our curriculum still have limitations in applying what they learn in real life. They lack real life application, so it’s difficult for the students to visualize how they’re going to apply the knowledge of these courses in real life situations. Each course has its own values and meaning, but their authenticity or real-life application isn’t high. (Ms. Yen)

All these things above could explain why the rate of employed graduates in Sociology was much lower than in English: from their *Graduate Survey*, 100% English graduates had jobs within one year after graduation, whereas it was only 53% in Sociology, as shown in these departments’ Self-evaluation Report in 2009 (HCMU’s Sociology 2009; HCMU’s English 2009). Perhaps it is also necessary to consider the influence of the job market: There were many more jobs for English than Sociology graduates. However, most Sociology students were quite content with the authenticity of assessment tasks in presentations and mini-projects, remarking that ‘most of the topics of these tasks are about what is happening in society because we are required to analyse real-life social issues and solve social problems.’ On the other hand, they complained that the mid-term and final exams of many courses mainly required them to analyse concepts and theories, which needed to be adjusted to have more connections with real-life social issues.

To sum up, for most lecturers, their assessment tasks seemed to be integrative within the courses they are teaching, but there was no evidence if they are integrative with the whole programme. In terms of authentic assessment, both departments were trying to use assessment tasks that were related not only to work but also to different real life activities. However, the English department focused more on tasks that helped prepare students for work, whereas the Sociology department put more emphasis on solving real life social matters. The next section will explore to what extent another element of Boud's framework – *learning and judgement* – is present in the assessment perspectives and practices in these two departments.

8.4 Learning and judgement

Improving student learning was a focus in both departments, and it was reflected through the lecturers' different assessment tasks. In this element, English and Sociology lecturers shared more similarities than differences in the capacities that they hoped students would develop.

8.4.1 Examinations and student learning

Most lecturers had similar opinions on the values of exams that they were not only to test students to get grades for qualifications but also to support student learning. According to Mr. Minh, exams were helpful to students because:

> Exams have its own benefits in that through reviewing the lessons for the exams, students can reflect on what they understand or don't so that they can have the background for new related courses. Also, it is a good way to train students work under pressure because they need to answer the questions in only 60 or 90 minutes. This may help them to deal with pressure and challenges later in their life.

Ms Huong remarked that open book exams required students to write short essays helped them build up the abilities to organize, analyse, and argue about an issue concisely in a short period of time. In addition, they helped avoid problems of other assessment methods, such as students being 'parasites' in group work. Similar opinions about the necessity of exams were found in most English students. They did not like the pressure and stress of exams and preferred other forms of assessment; yet they believed exams were necessary for them to revise what they had learned in the course:

> I like to have one presentation and one exam in a course. The presentation is for us to learn the knowledge beyond what's in the text books, and exam is to assess what we learn and understand from the textbooks, so it should be the final exam for us to review what we've learned in the course. The presentation is to assess our skills and exam is to assess our knowledge. However, the percentage of the final exam should be 30-40% instead of 70% to reduce pressure. (Ly)

Sociology students had similar ideas, adding that exams helped train them to be better in time management because they had to think and write in a very short time. However, most of them preferred open book exams because they believed the questions helped them to synthesise what they had learned in a logical way.

These could explain why exams were still dominated in most courses in both departments. It might not be just because of the traditional summative exam-based discourse having existed in Vietnamese HE for many years and the university assessment regulations, but also because of the values that exams could instill. Especially in the present changing HE context when alternative assessment methods seemed to be new, optional, and without any policy guidelines by the MOET or the university registry, exams might be considered as a good way to maintain quality and standards, and simultaneously to make students learn. Dr. Kim showed her concerns that the quality might be decreased due to the abolition of the graduation exam:

> Since this year, the university has abolished the graduation exam because of applying the credit system. Accordingly, when students accumulate enough credits, they'll graduate. However, it's also one thing I wonder, as Head of Assessment, about the quality. If we can't control the quality during the process of marking students in all the courses within four years, then we will make the programme too easy and less challenging for the students to get and they don't work hard enough. Consequently, instead of improving the quality, there's a risk to decrease the quality.

Dr. Mai in English shared similar opinions. For her, the graduation exam 'should be maintained to serve as the final stage for the students at least to review what they have already learned'. Also, it was the only exam that was double marked; thus it seemed to be fairer to the student and could avoid subjectivity and variation in marking. For these reasons, she protested abolishing it. She was worried that the quality would be affected if there were fewer challenges for students:

> Many Vietnamese students seem not to have enough self-awareness to be responsible for their own learning, so they just study to get a pass; they won't work hard enough. Some people may disagree with me, saying that I don't trust the young generation, but for me, we shouldn't dismantle all barriers for the students. If we dismantle one, we should have another, although less hard, but challenging enough for them to make them learn by overcoming those challenges. The graduation exam can be less tough and shouldn't be the only decisive factor for the students' future, but it's necessary for them at least to self-reflect and review their knowledge and skills and possibly improve their learning.

For both lecturers and students, exams at least to some extent could support learning. Nonetheless, there were many other important abilities and skills that exams could not help students to develop, and thus other methods of assessment were applied for this purpose.

8.4.2 Developing students' abilities through other assessment methods

Most English and Sociology lecturers were committed to using assessment tasks to improve student learning and had similar opinions about the skills they wanted students to develop. Through group work, they hoped to equip students with the ability to search, analyse, synthesise information, as well as the ability to work collaboratively and responsibly, and to make a presentation in public. In other assessment tasks, such as essay writing, portfolios, mini-projects, they focused on forming students' abilities to organise and analyse their ideas, make persuasive arguments, as well as the habit of thinking deeply and good reasoning.

Because of the differences in subject disciplines, each department expected their students to possess different skills although they shared some similar skills and abilities. The English lecturers aimed at developing students' ability to be competent users of the English language. As Dr. Lam remarked:

> Through assessment, we hope that, to some extent, we help students develop their thinking and reasoning. We really want them to be very competent, very professional in using the language in communication because we think that is a very necessary skill for them later on. The majority of students, in our experience, are not taught to think in a deeper way. This may be one of the weaknesses for their life. So, when they learn *Critical Thinking*, later on, they will use critical skills in life for learning or working.

For the Sociologists, in addition to assessing students' abilities to organize and analyse their ideas, they also focused on improving students' abilities to write a scientific report on social research using social statistics:

> With research methods, I mark the ability the students apply the research methods that they've learned in doing the project and the ability to write a scientific report on social research. Students should be able to distinguish the differences between writing a scientific report with other types of writing. I also expect them to know how to use statistics to write a report, and that's what I usually emphasise with them. With other courses, because our major is sociology, so I assess the students' ability to use the social approaches to explain or analyse a social issue or problem. So, it depends on each course that we assess students' different abilities. (Dr. Hoa)

However, critical thinking seemed to be weak. Among ten lecturers in the two departments, only Dr. Lam aimed at equipping students with critical thinking skills because he was teaching a *Critical Thinking* course for students of the honour programme. Also, many 'soft skills', such as negotiation, problem-solving, leadership skills, decision making, and so on, were not integrated into the courses. Thus most students were not equipped with them except those in the honours programme. As Dr. Mai explained:

> Many soft skills are very necessary for students; however, it's difficult to find specialists outside the university to teach these skills. In order to invite them to teach here, we need to offer them good pay, but our department can't afford that for all the students. We can only do so for students of the honour programmes because of fundings from the government for them.

Consequently, English students said, 'We are not taught these skills', 'we've just known about them recently when we took the apprenticeship', and 'we have to learn them by ourselves.' The same story about 'soft skills' was also found in Sociology. Although some abilities and skills were neglected, both Sociology and English departments were keen on building up students' ability of self-learning, which was to them a necessary but difficult task to do.

8.4.3 Developing students' autonomy in their learning

For the lecturers, students needed to be equipped with both 'thick' and 'thin' autonomy by learning how to learn so that they could direct not only their present but also future learning, as well as what they want to do and how they want their life to be in the future:

> Many students do not know how to learn and what to do. They seem to be aimless, so we need help them by showing them a way out, that is, learn how to learn. (Mr. Tan)

> I think it's impossible to expect students to have all necessary skills for their future jobs, but I want the students to be independent, can self- learn. For example, they should know how to search for information, arrange the information, use supporting sources, like books, the Internet, and so on. They should also need to learn from other people, like their friends, classmates or co-workers. (Ms. Phuong)

Bearing that in mind, they tried to guide their students on how to learn, for example, how to search and select information, how to read books and materials effectively, or by giving them exercises to form self-learning habits:

> I give them the audio clip as homework, they have to do it, and this has a large self-learning potentiality because if they like the clip, they can do like what I did: search for other clips and try to translate these by themselves. This helps them to form a habit of self-learning. (Ms. Chi)

Most English and Sociology students also tried to learn beyond what they were taught in the course:

> I usually learn other things outside the courses by myself. For example, things I encounter in daily life when I work part time, but not self-learn what we've already learned from the textbooks. (Kien –English)

> I usually try to understand the main points in class, and at home, if I have time, I'll review the lesson. Or if I go to the library and see a good book on the topics I like, I'll read it. (Lan – Sociology)

However, it was not easy to develop students' autonomy. Traditionally, students were dependent on the lecturer and learned what was taught. While some students were active and independent, and able to self-direct, many of them did not have the habit of searching for and doing more readings or being responsible for their own learning. As Dr. Lam explained:

> Many students don't have motivation for learning. They just want a passing grade. Therefore, there's a tendency that the students think: 'OK I just want an average. I don't want to care more about it.' This attitude will affect the way the students learn. If they don't care, they also don't want to learn by themselves.

Similarly, most English students admitted that many of them were lazy and did not want to learn:

> Many of my friends now think they just need a degree when studying at the university, and they will equip knowledge and skills by themselves later on. So when graduate from the university, they don't know much because there are a lot of knowledge and skills taught at school that they don't pay attention to. Sometimes, they go to class just to be there or to check attendance, and they don't care how the lecturers teach or don't care about self- learning. They just need to take the exam. (Phuong)

The Sociology department also encountered similar problems. However, it seemed to be more difficult for them because learning resources and students' English ability were limited. These problems made it difficult to develop students' autonomy in their learning. However, students in both departments seemed to appreciate the skills and abilities that they acquired through learning and assessment activities. For English students, after nearly four years of studying, they would become competent in using English in both spoken and written communications, as well as working in a team. Three students working part time confirmed that they felt confident in using English at work. According to Huy, 'graduates from our department are also highly evaluated in terms of language competence. Within four years, the most important skill I learn here is learning how to learn.' For Sociology students, the assessment and learning activities helped them 'know how to analyse and deal with social problems, have clear directions and find out better solutions for their own problems', and they 'become more emphatic when looking at problems, and very quick in recognising and solving problems than many other people.'

8.4.4 Peer assessment and self-assessment

The data showed that there was no self-assessment task and peer assessment was applied only in a few courses without guidelines. For example, in group presentations of Dr. Mai's *Literature* course, students were asked to give feedback to other groups' presentations. In Sociology, some courses also required them to mark their peers' presentations or peers' contributions to the group. Dr. Mai was cautious in applying peer assessment:

> I just let the students give feedback on their peers' papers or performance so that they can learn from their friends and reflect and improve their own learning when doing so. However, sometimes, the students give wrong or unreliable feedback because their understanding is limited. That's why I don't give them marks on their peer feedback, and the peer feedback is just an activity for the students to practice assessing others to build up their ability of judgement.

As self-assessment and peer assessment were still unfamiliar in Vietnamese HE, all lecturers in both departments had similar opinions that they can be applied, but students need to be trained to do so.

To sum up, both departments seemed to use their learning and assessment activities to prepare the students for some LLL capacities. However, critical thinking, ability to make judgement, and the formation of many 'soft skills' seemed to be weak, and thus the two departments needed to find ways to help students develop them. The next section will be about *Modelling and Practice*.

8.5 Modelling and Practice

In this element, the English department tended to be better than Sociology because due to the features of foreign language learning, students were provided with articles and documents as exemplars, and frequently practise how to use the language, as in Ms Chi's Translation and Interpretation courses, or Dr. Lam's and Ms. Phuong's writing courses. Also, they could read more from online resources:

> Before students are asked write one type of essays, they have exemplars of essays to analyse. And they can read a lot of them on the Internet. (Dr. Lam
>
> There are many English texts and videos on the Internet for the students to download in order to practise translation or interpretation. So they can learn from these rich online resources. (Ms. Chi)

In addition, nearly half of English courses were about language study in which students studied the four language skills: *Listening*, *Speaking*, *Reading*, and *Writing*. Thus, they have experienced many modelling activities on how native speakers use the language, as well as had a lot of opportunities to practise using it themselves. Although Sociology students were also provided with articles to read in their courses, these materials were still limited, and they had fewer opportunities for professional practice. Most Sociology lecturers remarked that in some courses there were fewer documents in Vietnamese, but more in English. However, most Sociology students could not read and understand these English documents:

> I have introduced some web pages to them so that they can do more readings. However, most students' English abilities are limited, so they can only read Vietnamese materials. That's insufficient. They also need to read in English because there are many new and updated English materials on these websites. (Mr. Tan)

Thus, it could be concluded that the English students had more opportunities and better conditions in terms of modelling and practices than their Sociology peers. The next section will explore the presence of the final element of Boud's framework – *giving and receiving feedback* – in the two departments.

8.6 Giving and receiving feedback

Giving and receiving feedback tended to be weak in both departments; however, English students received more feedback than Sociology. Sociology students mainly received feedback on group presentations; meanwhile their English peers got feedback for their writing assignments and portfolios, or immediate in-class feedback after their performance, such as in group presentations, translation and interpretation activities, and other courses. As Mr Minh stated:

> I give the students many practice exercises. With these exercises, students come and write their translated version on the board, and then we give feedback on that, I don't give them marks. We analyse the use of words, grammar, style, the focus and things related to it, and give comments.

Students in both departments only had more opportunities to obtain feedback in class. They did not have much feedback outside the classroom because these lecturers did not have office hours to meet students face-to-face for feedback and were not paid for that. Also, they were too busy teaching many courses; thus it was difficult to meet students outside the classroom, and they were not supported to do so:

> Actually, giving feedback to students can be a very tiring and boring job. We have to read a lot of papers to give feedback, but we aren't well appreciated. (Dr. Lam)

> I wish to spend time meeting students outside the classroom if they have more questions or want me to look at their translation versions and give comments. However, I can only afford giving them immediate feedback in class, but I can't spend time meeting students individually to give them feedback. (Ms. Chi)

Students in both departments also had similar opinions that they rarely met lecturers outside the classroom because they knew that the lecturers were too busy. One of the reasons for less feedback may be because it was the university regulation that the final exam papers could not be returned to them, yet the final exams were a dominant assessment method. Therefore, students only got the grade and did not know what was good and what they needed to improve in their exam papers. Most Sociology students in the focus group agreed with Thao's idea:

> When we studied at high school, after the exam, we can look at our exam papers and the teacher gave us feedback, so we know why we got the marks. But at university, we just know the marks from the exam, we can't look at our exam papers and don't get feedback on our exam papers, so we don't know why we get the marks, we don't know what we did well so that we'll develop it and what we did wrong and why and will try to avoid it.

Therefore, it could be concluded that in both departments, feedback mainly came from the lecturer to students, students just received immediate feedback in class, and there were fewer chances for them to get face-to-face feedback outside the classroom and no chance for feedback from their exam papers. In general, giving and receiving feedback seemed to be limited in the assessment practices of these two departments.

8.7 Conclusion

Although most elements of Boud's framework could be seen in the assessment practices of the two departments, the extent of their presence was different: English seemed to have higher extent of student engagement, working with peers, more authentic activities, more modelling and practices and in-class feedback than Sociology. Sociology highlighted collective and communal values of group work, while English emphasised a combination of autonomy and collectivity. Both shared similar views on the values of exams and students' skill development. However, the English department had stronger focuses on preparing students for employment than Sociology. Elements that were present with low extents at both departments included: giving and receiving feedback, developing 'soft skills', critical thinking and the ability to make judgement.

From the extent to which these elements existed in the English and Sociology assessment practices of the HCMU, it could be concluded that the assessment there somehow seemed to partially prepare students for LLL; however, it still showed a weak and incomplete picture of Boud's sustainable framework. The incompleteness of this framework was also seen in the UK case, although more elements were found in assessment practices of the MU's lecturers with stronger presence than the HCMU, such as forming critical, independent learners, transferable skills, and the focus on feedback. The similarities and differences between the two cases through their key assessment features and the lens of Boud's framework, the explanations of these similarities and differences, as well as the evaluation and reframing of the framework will be discussed in the following chapter.

9 Chapter nine: Comparing the two cases and theorising Boud's framework of sustainable assessment

9.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I described and analysed key assessment features and the extent to which the eight elements of Boud's framework were present in the assessment practices at the Sociology and English departments of the MU and the HCMU. There are three parts to this chapter. First, I now compare and contrast the two cases through their key assessment features and the lens of Boud's framework with four main theoretical features – *(i) being sustainable, (ii) developing informed judgement, (iii) constructing reflexive learners*, and *(iv)forming the becoming practitioners* – in order to judge to what extent assessment in these cases prepares students for LLL. Secondly, I explain the similarities and differences in terms of the economic, socio-cultural and HE contexts of the two cases. And, finally, I will evaluate Boud's framework and reframe it theoretically and operationally for these contexts and as a guide to improving practices.

The overall argument of the chapter is that, assessment in both the MU and the HCMU show an imperfect realisation of Boud's framework. Yet, if the practices are described in terms of the framework, a vision is offered for the two cases to aim for in terms of changing their assessment perspective and practice towards those more likely to support LLL. Moreover, this potential is enhanced and made applicable to more national contexts if the framework is developed to include the contextual and cultural features of assessment, and the development of human capabilities and functionings.

This chapter will therefore address the final two research questions:

4. How do we explain the similarities and differences of these assessment policies, philosophies and practices, and the impact and effect for student learning? Which conceptual framework provides robust explanatory power?

5. In light of these similarities and differences, to what extent is Boud's framework of sustainable assessment useful theoretically and operationally for the two case study contexts, and as a guide to improving practices?

9.2 Similarities and differences between the two cases

Assessment in the two departments in the MU and the HCMU shared both similarities and differences. Details about these features and elements of each case have been described and analysed in the previous chapters. In this section, I will compare and contrast the two cases through their main assessment features and the lens of Boud's framework. In general, more differences than similarities were found in the assessment regime, lecturers' assessment perspectives and practices, and professional development (PD) of the two cases. The MU's assessment regime seemed to be well-organised with detailed policies, guidelines, standards and criteria and tightly controlled by measures for quality assurance. Although there existed a tension between the

University senior managers', arguably, neoliberal viewpoint and the lecturers' educational perspectives on assessment, the regime seemed to allow more innovative practices and dialogues on teaching learning and assessment policy and practice between senior managers and lecturers at departmental levels. Meanwhile, the HCMU's assessment regime was dominated by exams combined with borrowed international practices. However, there was still a lack of assessment policy, guidelines, standards and criteria for these alternative assessment methods. The rigid top-down system tended to limit dialogues between senior managers and lecturers and weaken the voice of lecturers and students in the formation or innovation of teaching, learning, and assessment policy.

About assessment perspectives, most lecturers in both cases highlighted intrinsic learning and were committed to supporting students to learn. The Vietnamese lecturers applied some alternative assessment methods that were similar to their UK colleagues, such as group presentations and projects, portfolios, and peer-assessment, due to the strategic borrowing of international assessment practices. However, there were remarkable differences: the dominant assessment method in the UK case was coursework, especially essays, whereas it was the traditional examinations in the Vietnamese case. In addition, changes in the British lecturers' assessment practices seemed to be driven by the NSS, student module evaluations or staff and student meetings, and they were well supported in terms of policy that allowed flexibility in practice with detailed guidance, team teaching, PD and mentoring at departmental level and with fewer constraints except for student numbers and lack of time. For the Vietnamese lecturers, changes in their assessment practices originated from their experiential learning about assessment and their strong commitment in trying to do more for their students. They were keen on applying alternative assessment methods with a strong belief that this might help improve student learning despite facing many constraints in the way, not only on student numbers and lack of time, but also on low salary and lack of support from different levels at the University. In addition, at MU, PD through informal mentoring and dialogues at departmental level was considered more helpful and effective than the University's short training courses. Meanwhile, at HCMU, short training courses on the subject disciplines were perceived to be useful. Nonetheless, teaching methodology courses were not highly evaluated, and there was still a lack of PD courses, dialogues, mentoring for lecturers in the field of assessment.

In brief, I have compared and contrasted the two cases through their key assessment features, including the assessment regimes, lecturers' assessment perspective and practice, and PD. What emerged from this comparison were two different pictures: assessment at the MU was well-established, enabled more innovative practices, and focused on formative assessment while assessment at the HCMU was exam-based with initial steps to move towards formative assessment and still faced many constraints during the change process. Now, I will look at the two cases comparatively through the lens of the four main features of Boud's framework identified at the beginning of the chapter in order to judge to what extent assessment in each site prepares students for LLL.

The lens of Boud's framework

(i) Being sustainable

Assessment is sustainable when it aims not only at meeting learning content and outcomes at university, but also at preparing students for future learning and work (Boud 2010a). Sustainable assessment emphasises developing contextualised higher order knowledge and skills, and prevents students from being dependent on others, especially lecturers (*ibid.*). In terms of alignment between assessment activities and learning outcomes, for UK lecturers, the assessment activities in their own courses were connected with each other and aligned with the learning outcomes of the programme. Course and School reviews were carried out as measures to ensure such alignment. Vietnamese lecturers also believed that their assessment tasks were linked with each other and aligned with the course objectives; yet there was no evidence of an alignment with the programme learning outcomes which had just been designed and thus needed more amendments.

In addition, UK lecturers focused on developing the 'individual self' who is *critical, creative, independent*, *cooperative* and *employable*. These capacities are the key learning outcomes at the MU. Thus, the UK lecturers' assessment activities aimed at developing research skills, analytical skills, and the ability to work independently. They also used authentic tasks related to what people do in real-life and work situations to prepare students for their future work and life. However, despite the stated goal of cooperative students, the focus on developing the 'self' provided less space for 'others'. Meanwhile, Vietnamese lecturers, especially the Sociologists, highlighted collective and communal values (educating them to live well and show concerns for other people in communities) through the integration of developing expansive graduate attributes in teaching and learning activities and the application of the Holistic Assessment of the Student's Self-improvement (HASS) – grading each student holistically in their learning achievement and attitudes, as well as participation in extra-curricular community activities. These lecturers also hoped to help students become independent, yet the focus on collectivity and the Vietnamese traditional norm that frames students as passive and dependent recipients of knowledge from the lecturers might make it difficult to achieve the hoped-for goals. In addition, although the Vietnamese lecturers were trying to use alternative forms of assessment and authentic tasks to prepare students for work and life, these practices might not be sustainable due to many constraints, in particular, the dominance of the examination system. Therefore, in terms of meeting the learning outcomes and preparing students for future learning and work, assessment in the UK case seemed to be more sustainable than the HCMU.

(ii) Developing informed judgement

One of the most important aspects of informed judgement, for Boud (2010a), is to inform students about their work and develop their capacities for making a judgement of their own learning and the learning of others. This can be built through different learning and assessment activities, such as critically analysing and solving problems, collecting evidence, giving, receiving and using feedback, as well as peer assessment and self-assessment tasks through all stages of the whole programme (Boud 2010a; Boud and Falchikov 2007). In the UK case, developing critical thinking was one of the most important learning outcomes that the UK lecturers aimed at. Thus, students were also supported to form their capacities of making judgement through doing critical and analytical tasks and providing them with formative feedback to improve their work. Also, improving feedback was a focus at MU, and students had more opportunities for both written and face-to-face feedback during office hours.

In the Vietnamese case, critical thinking was also what the lecturers hoped students would form; however, it was still a challenging task because the students were used to rote learning for the exams; therefore, the capacities for debating, arguing or making judgement about what they were learning were still weak. In addition, students had fewer opportunities to be informed about their progress through feedback because they mostly got in-class feedback and limited written feedback. In both UK and Vietnamese cases, peer assessment and self-assessment tasks were not commonly used, and thus students mainly received feedback from their lecturers. Students might nonetheless form the capacities for making judgement through different learning and assessment activities, especially in tasks requiring critical analysis. In summary, then, in general, assessment activities in the UK provided students with more opportunities to develop informed judgement.

(iii) Constructing reflexive learners

According to Boud (2010a), in order to become reflexive learners, students need to participate in the assessment process and to perceive themselves as a 'pro-active and generative learner'. He emphasises the continuous development of reflexivity and self-regulation through assessment and all other facets from the beginning of the course. In both UK and Vietnamese cases, students could actively take part in assessment design by being allowed to choose their own assessment topic and decide what and how they wanted to do it. The lecturers also used group work and authentic learning and assessment activities to get students' engagement in the learning and assessment process. These might help them become active learners and form the habit of taking responsibility for their own learning.

Most UK and Vietnamese lecturers emphasised forming students' capacity to self-direct their learning, yet UK students had more support and better conditions in fostering reflexivity. They had tutorial sessions and formative feedback from the lecturers and met with their personal tutors each semester to discuss their academic results. Vietnamese students did not have similar learning facilities and support from the lecturers. Also, due to the habit of being directed by the lecturers, it was difficult for Vietnamese students to develop the capacity of monitoring their own learning. However, in both sites, reflective assessment tasks were still limited in different ways. There were only a few reflective tasks in MU's English department, and none was found in MU's Sociology and at HCMU. Yet, the practice of the HASS at HCMU to some extent helped students make reflection on their performances at the end of each academic year.

(iv) Forming the becoming practitioners

According to Boud (2010a), becoming practitioners in learning and assessment requires students to be reflexive and confident in monitoring their learning and assessment. He emphasises that students must be able to use assessment standards and criteria to make 'informed judgement' and build up this capacity with their peers. As mentioned above, the UK and Vietnamese lecturers encouraged students to take risks and develop confidence in what they were doing by allowing them to choose what and how to do their assessment topics. In terms of modelling and practice, while the MU students could use exemplars and self-tests on Web CT and have access to rich sources of learning materials, for the HCMU students, these opportunities were limited because of financial and technological constraints. In the UK case, there were detailed sets of assessment standards and criteria that students could use as guidelines to make their own judgement, whereas the Vietnamese case did not have them. Also, in the two cases, group work as learning and assessment activities might provide students with opportunities to work with their peers to build up these capacities. For both UK and Vietnamese lecturers and students, group work helped develop team-working skills and learning from peers. However, it was difficult to know whether the students were confident in making judgements, and this would be more challenging for the Vietnamese students who were used to depending on their lecturers. Therefore, in both cases, students needed more practices to support them to be able to make judgement against standards and criteria in order to become practitioners in learning and assessment.

In looking at assessment at the two sites comparatively through the lens of Bouds framework, it is concluded that the MU might better prepare students for ‘reductive’ LLL through equipping them with key LLL capacities – being critical and creative thinkers, independent learners, and employable graduates. Meanwhile, the preparation of these capacities appeared to be weak in the HCMU. However, the HCMU lecturers’ LLL approach seemed to be more ‘expansive’ with the emphasis on collective values and the inclusion of forming students’ abilities to live well with others in the community and make contribution to society. The presence of these four main features of Boud’s framework at the two sites can be summarised in Table 9.1, in which the sign (+) is used for elements with strong presence and (–) for those with weak presence in the lecturers’ assessment practices. As seen from this table, both cases were incomplete pictures of Boud’s framework, although more of its elements and features were found in the UK than the Vietnamese case. Arguably, this does not mean that Boud’s framework cannot be applicable in the Vietnamese context. More elements of it have the potential to be there as long as some conditions are met.

Table 9.1 The presence of the four main features of Boud's framework at both sites

The lens of Boud's framework		MU	HCMU
(i) Being sustainable	• Alignment among assessment activities within the module.	+	+
	•Alignment between assessment activities and programme learning outcomes	+	–
	Developing the 'self'	+	–
	Developing collective and communal values	–	+
	Forming independent learners	+	–
(ii) Developing informed judgement	Developing critical thinkers	+	–
	'in-class' feedback	+	+
	Opportunities for written and face-to-face feedback	+	–
	Peer assessment tasks	–	–
	Self-assessment tasks	–	–
(iii) Constructing reflexive learners	Students were allowed to choose their assessment topics	+	+
	Engaging students by group work and authentic learning and assessment activities	+	+
	Opportunities for fostering reflexivity (tutorial sessions and formative feedback)	+	–
	Reflexive assessment tasks	–	–
(iv) Forming the becoming practitioner	Supportive conditions for practice (exemplars, self-tests, and learning materials)	+	–
	Opportunities to work with peers in learning and assessment activities	+	+
	Detailed assessment standards and criteria	+	–
	Students were confident in making judgement	No evidence	No evidence

To sum up, this section has compared and contrasted the two cases through their key assessment features and the lens of Boud's framework. It was mainly found that they shared the following similarities:

(i) The lecturers' emphasis on intrinsic learning and their commitment to improve student learning through teaching and assessment activities.
(ii) The use of similar alternative assessment methods: presentations, portfolios, group work, although their implementations varied in the different contexts.
(iii) Engaging students in the assessment process by group work, authentic activities and by letting them to have a choice on the assessment topics.
(iv) Key capacities they hoped students to develop, such as critical thinking, independent learning, and employability.

Apart from these similarities, there were main differences between the two cases, as illustrated in Table 9.2. The reasons and explanations for these similarities and differences will be discussed in the next section.

Table 9.2 Main differences in assessment at MU and HCMU

	Assessment at MU	**Assessment at HCMU**
1.	Well-organised and effectively operated with detailed policies, guidelines, standards and criteria.	In the process of change; lack of policies, guidelines, standards and criteria.
2.	More focus on developing the 'self'.	More focus on developing communal and collective values.
3.	Dominated by coursework, especially essays, with the focus on formative feedback.	Dominated by exams with the integration of borrowed international assessment methods.
4.	Changes driven by the NSS, students' module evaluations or staff-student meetings.	Changes driven by lecturers' commitment and experiential learning.
5.	Effective informal PD with dialogues and support for lecturers at departmental level.	Lack of dialogues, mentoring, support, and PD for lecturers.
6.	Constraints in time and student number.	Many constraints, mainly limited teaching and learning resources, over-crowded classes, low salary for lecturers, lack of support from different levels at the University.

9.3 Explaining the similarities and differences between the two cases

There may be many reasons for the similarities and differences in assessment of the two cases; however, I will only focus on the main ones that have important impacts on shaping the assessment features of each university, including: *the national economic and HE contexts, assessment cultures and approaches*, *national socio-cultural values*, and *the Vietnamese perspective on LLL*.

9.3.1 The national economic and HE contexts

(i) Impacts of globalisation on the two HE systems

The national economic and HE contexts clearly do influence what the assessment regime looks like and how it is operated. The UK HE context is characterised by a tension between the economic goals emphasised at policy and managerial level and the social and educational goals highlighted by researchers (Walker 2006; Mann 2008). Driven by globalisation and neoliberalism, HE policies in the UK tend to focus on developing 'world-class' graduates in order to meet the demands of the knowledge economy and maintain its competitive advantage in the global market (Olssen and Peters 2005; Rizvi 2007). Due to this neoliberal agenda, in the MU case study, there was a taken-for-granted view that they had to compete globally, the university was a global and international university, and students had to be equipped with skills so that they could get jobs and compete in a global market. All of these were reflected in the University's quality assurance, learning outcomes, and curriculum. Together with this was the neoliberal quality assurance perspective of the University Head of Assessment and a neoliberal language naturalised by the lecturers. Even so, for the lecturers, it was not only about global competition and employability: there was a deep commitment to student learning, real concerns for students and space for LLL. Perhaps such a tension between the MU’s managerial and academic viewpoints originated from the tension in the present UK HE context between education for the economy and education for broader personal development. However, the neoliberal constraints also allowed innovative practices that the MU lecturers used to support student learning.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese HE is strongly influenced by colonial legacies, globalisation, and internationalisation. As a developing country, Vietnam is trying to improve its economy in order to reduce poverty, become a middle-income country, and integrate into the global economy. One of the most important goals is to reform its HE system in order to become more effective and approach international education in terms of quality and standards. The influences of globalisation and internationalisation contribute to shaping the micro-level features of the assessment regime and the lecturers’ perspectives and practices at the HCMU through the critical borrowing of international assessment approaches and methods. Such borrowing can be the reasons why some above-mentioned similarities in assessment perspectives and practices exist in the MU and the HCMU.

However, unlike the MU, in the HCMU, it was not taken for granted that the University was a global player, and people were struggling and trying to work out how they were positioned in relation to global competition and what kind of students they need to be educating so that they could take their place in the country and contribute to economic development. Thus, the HCMU lecturers were just taking initial steps in changing assessment to be in line with international perspectives and practices. Equipping students with Vietnamese moral, cultural, and collective values is extremely significant to sustainable development of the individual student, the society, and the economy.

(ii) Influences of economic situations on the HE systems of the two countries

The UK is one of the world's high-income and leading countries in education and MU is an elite and well-resourced English university; thus, the UK lecturers and students have better conditions in terms of human resources, facilities, and more support with policies and management to improve student learning. That is why they can give and receive more feedback and apply ICT, such as web CT and online library resources. These resources support students in self-learning and lecturers in organising teaching and assessment activities that can help the individual student become an independent learner, critical thinker, and develop other important capacities for work and life.

In contrast, Vietnam is still a developing country, facing many challenges to its economy. Financial constraints are among the main causes of various problems which hinder the lecturers from giving more feedback, using ICT, or applying teaching and assessment methods that enable independent learning, criticality, and other higher-order thinking skills. Mark moderation and double marking are traditionally used only in important examinations. There is no policy requiring this on degree courses, and the lack of teaching staff at universities also prevents this happening. Apart from the economic and HE contexts, the history of assessment cultures and approaches of each country also contribute to the similarities and differences between the two cases.

9.3.2 Assessment cultures and approaches

Since the beginning of the 1990s, UK assessment has moved from a testing culture which measured and ranked students by summative assessment, especially by examinations starting in 1815, to an 'assessment-for-learning' culture which supports student learning with formative assessment and aligns assessment to teaching and learning, yet still interacts with the traditional testing culture (Falchikov 2005; Havnes and McDowell 2008). This culture is characterised by students' active involvement in the assessment process, assessing students' works against standards and criteria, and alternative assessment methods, such as portfolios, learning logs, group work, presentations, peer assessment, self-assessment, and so on (Havnes and McDowell 2008; Orr 2008). Essentially, it puts formative feedback at the core in improving student learning (Wiliam 2009; Nicol 2009). These cultural features were imprinted in the assessment perspectives and practices at the two departments of the MU in the domination of formative assessment, especially essays, together with other assessment methods, including examinations. They were seen through students' taking part in designing assessment by choosing their own assessment topics, and students' being assessed via sets of standards and criteria and some of the above alternative assessment methods. These cultural features were also reflected in how feedback was valued: the lecturers' commitment to improving their feedback and giving students more formative and face-to-face feedback.

Meanwhile, in Vietnamese HE, the testing culture by selecting and ranking students has existed for centuries, starting with the first exam in the Ly Dynasty in 1075 (Nguyen P. 1999; Nguyen C. 1998). Until now, this long-term established summative assessment culture still dominates HE assessment with the highly competitive university entrance exam, as well as mid-term and final exams in classroom assessment practices. Also, Vietnamese universities have traditionally used grades to measure students' performance instead of standards and criteria. These cultural features shaped assessment in the two departments of the HCMU as summative and exam dominated. However, the recent critical borrowing of international perspectives and practices has also been integrated into the traditional summative assessment culture.

- The critical borrowing of international assessment approaches in the Vietnamese context

Influenced by international assessment approaches and practices during the colonised periods in the past and globalisation and internationalisation at present, strategically borrowed alternative assessment methods were found in the practices of the Vietnamese lecturers, especially in the English department. Thus, the borrowed practices cause some above-mentioned similarities in the UK and Vietnamese cases. Yet, the same alternative assessment methods, when tailored to be suitable for the Vietnamese context, became different from the original ones when they were implemented at the HCMU.

Nevertheless, why were these alternative assessment methods, although applied by most lecturers in the Vietnamese case, only a subordinate component? Apart from the dominant examination culture, the University assessment regulation of 70% final exam and 30% others, and teaching constraints, there were differences in the cultures of teaching, learning and assessment between the West and Vietnam. From their own experience learning about assessment, most lecturers believed that these borrowed methods may help improve student learning, since using only exams is insufficient to form key capacities for students' work and life. On the other hand, the lecturers were aware of cultural and contextual differences in applying borrowed practices. Most of them cautiously used these methods as one of the complementary assessment components, not the major ones. This may be the reason why some methods (e.g. group presentations) were used more in learning rather than in assessment.

Findings from the peer-feedback intervention show that peer-feedback could be effectively used in the honours programme of the English department with 25 students. Other critically transferred practices by the lecturers in both departments included stories about both success and failure of alternative assessment methods when applied in a very different context and culture from the West. Thus, although the two assessment cultures are different, what works in the UK assessment culture might also work or have the potential to work in the Vietnamese HE context, as long as contextual and cultural issues are not compromised. That is, these assessment practices need to be adjusted in order to be appropriate to the Vietnamese culture and context, and some conditions, especially those of fewer student numbers and more training for students and lecturers, are met.

9.3.3 The national socio-cultural values

Apart from the national economic and HE context, assessment cultures and approaches, other important reasons can be the differences and transfer in the national social and cultural values. I will attempt to explain the differences between the two cases through examining three features of national socio-cultural values of Vietnam and the UK – (i) *self and others,* (ii) *power relations,* and (iii) *the crisis of the modern Vietnamese society under the impacts of globalisation.* Here, *self and others* does not mean that one's existence excludes the other, but refers to which one is focused more in a culture. I am also aware of Mason's remark that researchers should be careful not to stereotype, consider culture as 'monolithic', or over-emphasise its impacts in a complex, diverse, hybrid, and interdependent world (2007: 166, 169).

(i) Self and others

For Jarvis (2009b), Western societies highlight 'the individual self', whereas 'the inter-personal self' is the focus of countries influenced by Confucian thought. In the UK HE context, the curricula, graduate learning outcomes, and dominant version of LLL seem to be strongly individualised: all is about the individual, not about the group, the collective (Barnett 2006; Hinchliffe 2006; Walker 2012). This might be the reason why the MU lecturers concentrated more on assessment that is beneficial to the development of an individual student. However, what do universities want their students to be? There is a tension between managerial and academic viewpoints. For educational policy makers and managers, the prime goal of university education is reduced to an economic one as 'the production of rational individuals who can contribute to the economic well-being of the nation' (Mann 2008: 70). For academics, it should be a more expansive perspective not only for student learning in HE but also for LLL which includes economic, educational and social purposes, for example, Barnett's (2006) argument on developing 'critical being' and 'criticality', for Mann's (2001) on 'personal engagement, inclusion, and LLL' (p. 6-7), or Walker's (2012) on a 'human capabilities' model of lifelong education with 'well-being' and 'agency'.

Key capacities listed in the learning outcomes that HE graduates need to achieve may include: being *employable graduates, critical and creative thinkers,* and *independent learners*. Thus, the capacities for questioning, debating, making critical analysis and judgement, critically reflecting and self-directing their learning, as well as transferable skills were emphasised in the teaching and assessment practices of the MU lecturers. Certainly, there was also group work to build their team-working skills; however, individual benefits which a student might obtain when working with others, such as better communication skills in their future jobs and personal life, were emphasised. Such individualised focus is also shown in the fact that each student in both departments had their personal tutor to guide them through the whole learning process of their degree.

This resonates one of the findings in Booth *et al*.'s (2009: 932) empirical research that the lecturers emphasised more strongly developing the 'self' than the ability to show empathy and communicate with others. Therefore, Booth *et al*. (2009), Barnett (2006), and Hinchliffe (2006) argue for more focus on 'others', and the development of the 'self' in relation to others and society. For them, university education should develop 'the capabilities to be self-reflective and autonomous, to connect strongly with others, and to be socially aware and responsible' (Booth *et al.* 2009: 931).

Meanwhile, 'others' is highlighted in Vietnamese culture and society, which can bring both advantages and challenges to the innovations of HE teaching, learning and assessment practices. Because of continuous wars and battles against foreign invaders through history and the needs for dyke protection and wet rice cultivation, village-life became the centre of Vietnamese culture, in which community cooperation and unity, as well as patriotism were highlighted and shaped the typical Vietnamese characters and social values

(Pham and Fry 2004a; Tran 2008). Adding to the village-life culture were the influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and socialism. All contribute to make collective and communal values – love and sacrifice for the community, for family and others, putting *others* first, not *me* first, and putting community needs above individual needs – the foundation of Vietnamese culture and society. Although there are many changes which make collectivity less strong than in the past, it is still emphasised in the present society. In a collective culture, individuality, when necessary, is 'sacrificed' for communal interests and personal views can be reduced to be in line with dominant perspectives. Thus, the positive aspect of collectivity can be that it helps generate national unity and strengths, as well as stabilises the country and society. Arguably, extreme collectivity may not encourage people to become different, independent, and critical, which can be an important impetus to social development. It is difficult for a society to develop if people just follow dominant viewpoints, leaving no space or respect for critical, different or opposing opinions.

How can the traditional emphasis on collectivity in the Vietnamese culture and society influence learning and assessment at the HCMU? Findings showed that the Sociology lecturers focused on developing students' capacity to live well with others in the community and the English lecturers the ability to use the English language in communication with others. With collective values, it seemed to be easier for students to be engaged, to learn from and support their peers in group work and other learning and assessment activities. Students might also feel more confident working with others with joint responsibilities and more responsible for what they were doing in relation to their group. Thus, the collective culture might facilitate the critical transfer of Western practices of group work, especially group presentations, which can explain why group work has increasingly become common in learning and assessment activities in both departments. Also, with thought and actions driven by collective values, students might feel part of, live more responsibly with the community and care about others through community contribution activities beyond the curricula. On the other hand, too much emphasis on collectivity could be the cause of students' relying on the group, being 'parasites' or complying with the group, which might discourage students' willingness to make criticism, be different, or independent. This can be one of the challenges for the HCMU lecturers and students when building up critical thinking, independent learning and creativity.

In addition, the traditional village-life community, where people's relationship was based on care, bonds and attachment, helped shape one of the typical Vietnamese characters as emotional-based: their thinking and actions tended to be more on emotions than reasoning (Tran 2008). People tried to live harmoniously and avoid conflicts and disputes (Pham and Fry 2004b; Nguyen *et al.* 2006). This might result in the fact that most Vietnamese students usually hesitate to have different opinions, argue against and disagree with peers and especially with the lecturers directly or strongly for fear that it will hurt their feelings or make them 'lose face'. Possibly, due to such emotional influences, in the HCMU, debating, questioning, and making critical analysis or judgement seemed to be undermined in the teaching and learning practices, which could be a challenge for developing those capacities. On the other hand, this emotional awareness is a potential strength because this may encourage a supportive learning environment where students help each other to improve. In addition to different cultural focuses on the 'self' and 'others', power relations in the UK and Vietnam contexts may also influence assessment practices in the two cases.

(ii) Power relations

In the UK context, for Rowland (2006), the power relationship between the university and society, the managers and lecturers, as well as lecturers and students is driven by 'a dynamic tension between compliance and contestation' (p. 17). He argues that people have to comply with the reductionist agenda of university education as preparing students for the global knowledge economy, characterised by accountability and quality assurance, yet simultaneously contest for a more expansive social and cultural discourse of education for democracy with freedom and social justice (Rowland 2006: 17-19). Such tension in the UK power relationships may explain the tension between senior managers' viewpoints on quality assurance and accountability and the lecturers' educational perspectives in the MU case. There was sign of 'compliance' and 'contestation' in the lecturers' perspectives and practices: they have to comply with the neoliberal system, yet contest against it by putting student learning above anything else.

Meanwhile, there is a power distance in the Vietnamese culture, as Pham (2010: 54) remarks: 'Vietnam is a high "power distance" culture: people in higher position of authority want their subordinates to conform.' Thus, the Vietnamese manager-lecturer and lecturer-student relationships are more about 'compliance' than 'contestation'. This can be one of the reasons for the centralised system in Vietnamese HE and at the HCMU in particular: all departments had to follow top-down policies and regulations coming from the MOET and the University Management Board. Such compliance leads to the lack of dialogue between the University's senior managers and lecturers, as well as of lecturers' and students' autonomy. Thus, the lecturers' and students' voice seem to be silent in the policy formation and implementation process. Essentially, the lecturers are not supported in terms of policies, encouragement, or finance when they want to apply any changes, which is a significant obstacle for reform.

Turning now to student-lecturer power relations, for Rowland (2006), the shift of focus from teaching into learning encourages 'critique', 'imagination' and 'contestation' in student learning and helps bring about more power equality in the teacher-student relationship; yet this seems to be weakened by the neoliberal system of quality assurance and accountability highlighting 'compliance and predictability' in which students have to comply to achieve the learning outcomes (p. 21-22). He also argues that the instrumental, economic trend of HE empowers students as customers and moves the teacher-student relationship towards 'provider-consumer' based more on 'legal means' rather than on trust and collaborative values, which may negatively influence collaboration between lecturers and students (p.66). Such provider-customer relationship tends to be encouraged by the 2011 White Paper '*Student at the Heart of the System*' in which students will have to pay higher fees, and thus they will have more freedom of choice (BIS 2011b). However, students seem to be empowered in terms of protecting customers' rights and satisfaction to ensure they will get something 'value for money' in return to their investment. Also, in her analysis of students' 'alienation and engagement', Mann (2001) maintains that the instrumental and economic goal of university education can hinder intrinsic learning and thus cause alienation. Students have to comply with a 'prescribed path' in order to meet the demands of their courses; consequently they lose the power of owning their learning, and such inequity in power relations makes students feel 'alienated' (p. 9–14). Thus, she argues for 'the redistribution of power' so that 'students can exercise power over their own learning and development' (p. 17).

The teacher-student power relation analysed by Rowland and Mann, to some extent, may explain some findings at the MU. Clearly, what most MU lecturers did was not just about global competition: they showed a deep commitment in learning for its own sake and real concerns for students through using their teaching and assessment activities to support student learning. In fact, they seemed to be against the consumerist trend of HE that treats students as customers and tries to meet their demands. However, the 'provider-customer' relation can be seen in the fact that some changes in assessment at the two departments, especially the commitment to improving feedback in recent years, were driven by the demands of 'customers' – the

NSS survey, departmental student evaluations, and students' suggestions in meetings between students' representatives and departmental senior managers. Although most focus group students recognise many lecturers' commitment in helping them to improve their learning and giving helpful feedback, some of them still complained and demanded lecturers spend more time on them, using the customers' language, such as 'We *pay* them, so they should spend more time for us.'

The MU students were empowered by having freedom of choice for their own assessment topics, which brought them opportunities to take ownership of their learning. However, although the departments were trying to communicate with students about taking face-to-face feedback, not many students took the opportunities. Some of the reasons could be that they might feel alienated, especially the first year students who were still unfamiliar with the learning culture at university, or there might still be a power distance or a communication gap in the lecturer - student relation. These could make students hesitate to consult the lecturers, as most students in the focus groups remarked that some of them were helpful and 'cool' but others were not.

Above all, students' voice in the MU case seemed to be strong and influential in the changes of teaching, learning and assessment, which was not the case of the HCMU. In traditional Vietnam culture and society, some of the key norms and values include: the love for learning, strong emphasis on moral education, and respect for teachers (Pham and Fry 2004b). In the old days, teaching was ranked the first, and farming the second of all occupations, as the old

Vietnamese saying, ‘You can’t be successful without teachers’, or ‘If you want your children to study well, you must respect teachers’ (Pham and Fry 2004b). The strong respect for teachers shaped teacher-student relationships as *hierarchical*, instead of Western’s views of equity and cooperation, yet the traditional emotional-based community also made this relationship *emotional* – not only with responsibilities but also with love and care. Hierarchically, it was the *superior – subordinate* relationship influenced by Confucian values in which students were expected to conform to the teachers’ power (Harman and Nguyen 2010; Pham 2010). Emotionally, students were supposed to respect teachers as their family members; simultaneously, teachers tend to be devoted to students and want to do the best for them.

These traditional values, despite being diminished, still exist in modern society. This is the reason why the contemporary society shows concerns for education and most parents are committed to investing in their children’s learning. Although teaching is not one of the most favourable jobs and teachers are not as strongly respected as before due to socio-cultural impacts of the free market economy, this relationship is still both hierarchical and emotional, and not considered as *provider – customer*, but as *superior – subordinate* and *transformer – receiver* of knowledge and skills. Although most young lecturers in the study considered their students as ‘friends’, it was still an unequal relationship in which students still played a passive role. It is based on *commitment (teacher) – respect (student)*, though not as fully as in the old days. The *emotional commitment – respect* aspect in this relationship might be the reason why although there were lecturers who did not want to change, many in the HCMU case were devoted to trying to do more for their students by applying alternative assessment methods to improve student learning. Yet, it did not bring them any personal benefits: they were not required to do so in terms of policies, received no support and encouragement from the University, and had to spend more work and time without pay. If this had not originated from their love and care for the students and aspiration to make changes in teaching and learning, they would not have done it. Also, most focus-group students seemed to be grateful for the lecturers who were committed to teaching and trying to improve their learning. Although there were some lecturers and subjects that they did not like, they talked about them with respect and sympathy. The consumer's language, such as 'We *pay* them, so they should...', was unheard of.

However, the Confucian *hierarchical* aspect of the teacher-student relationship seemed to be one of the causes of assumptions that what the teachers said was always true, and students learned what they were told without questioning the teachers, which may be considered as an obstacle for change. It could weaken students' voice in the change process and be one of the causes of teacher-centred methods and the students' passive or rote learning style in many Vietnamese HE classrooms. This was found in the HCMU case. Although there were group discussions and presentations in addition to lectures, especially in the English department, many students were used to being dependent on the lecturers and did not have the habit of questioning or debating with their lecturers and peers. This might lead to their lack of confidence about themselves and make it difficult to develop criticality and independent learning.

However, although aspects of these traditional socio-cultural values – collectivity, emotional-based ways of thinking and communication, strong respect for teachers – still exist and have both negative and positive impacts on university education, especially on the teaching, learning, and assessment, present Vietnamese culture and society has been changing and incorporating international values and norms, especially Western values due to the influences of the French, the American, and the Soviet Union in the recent history, and the impacts of globalisation and internationalisation. Such incorporation and influences may result in both positive and negative effects and changes and that although globalisation can be a good means for Vietnam to develop the economy, technology and HE, it may be one of the causes of the crisis in the modern Vietnamese culture and society. These socio-economic changes might lead to the changes in the teaching, learning, and assessment at the HCMU.

(iii) The crisis of modern Vietnamese society under the impacts of globalisation

Vietnamese culture, society, and education have experienced Western influences from two different political perspectives – capitalism and socialism – during different periods in recent Vietnamese history: the French, the American, and the Russian. Since Doi Moi (innovation) began in 1986, the country has moved towards a free market economy but oriented by socialism, and the Soviet-styled HE system has been transformed into a Western influenced system (Pham and Fry 2004a; Harman and Nguyen 2010). In recent years, Western capitalist influences have been increasing in Vietnam due to globalisation and internationalisation, bringing about many changes, opportunities and problems in Vietnamese culture and society. On the one hand, the influences of globalisation and Western values and perspectives can help industrialise the economy and move people from an agricultural life-style into a more industrial one: people become more active and dynamic (Tran 2008). In terms of HE, they provide a background for the development of students' criticality and autonomy, which are important capacities for their learning at and beyond university. This is reflected in the HCMU lecturers' practices where they were trying to incorporate Western teaching and assessment methods. The fact that there were more practices and success of such critical borrowing in the English department is not surprising because the department had more Western influences.

On the other hand, as Tran (2008) argues, modern Vietnamese society has to face 'an invasion' of Western culture, not through colonisation as before but through economic globalisation. Together with strong economic growth in recent years[13] – is the crisis of socio-cultural values. Never before has Vietnamese society encountered so many challenges. Some of the most worrying social concerns are: money or financial values seem to be put above

[13] In 2008, Vietnam was ranked 70/134 for global competitiveness Harman, G., Hayden, M., and Pham, T. N. (2010) "Higher Education in Vietnam: Reform, Challenges and Priorities", in G. Harman, M. Hayden, and T. N. Pham (eds) *Reforming Higher Education in Vietnam: Challenges and Priorities*, Netherlands: Springer.

moral values, sincerity and truthfulness are undermined by cheating and dishonesty; and individuality has increased and threatens traditional collectivity (Doan 2005; Tran 2008). The market economy has brought in new social problems: increasing divorce rate, child abuse, drug addictions, and other social crimes (Doan 2005).

One of the causes of these problems might be that the response to globalisation is more about developing the national economy in order to integrate into the global market; thus the socio-cultural effects of globalisation tend not to be paid enough attention. In addition, citizenship education at school and universities fails to capture the complex changes in the new society due to its strong emphasis on political education. As Doan (2005) remarks, there exists two moral systems: the informal traditional moral values nurtured through family and religious education (e.g. Buddhism or Christianity) and the formal socialist ideology taught in schools and universities. Thus, in the formal education system, political education – teaching students to understand socialist doctrines and be committed to socialism – tends to be put more emphasis than the moral education – teaching them traditional moral values, for example, love and care for family, others and the community. Political courses, such as *History of the Communist Party*, *Marxist-Leninist Political Economy*, *Scientific Socialism,* and *Ho Chi Minh Thought* are compulsory in the HE curricula, and their utility for students' intellectual and moral formation and development, as well as how to integrate the conflicting principles of socialist ideology and capitalist market economy are under query in the modern society (Doan 2005;

Harman and Nguyen 2010). Consequently, under the impacts of globalisation, the lack of traditional moral education, careful selection and critical transformation of suitable Western values, as well as effective measures to preserve the Vietnamese socio-cultural legacies can shake the long-term established socio-cultural foundations and make Vietnamese society more vulnerable. This may puzzle the young generation about which values they should follow and what kind of people they want to be.

How do these socio-cultural problems affect the teaching, learning and assessment in the two departments of the HCMU? Most lecturers complained about the fact that many students came to the classroom with no learning motivation: they just learned to pass the exam and get the degree. This might make it difficult for universities to preserve the traditional love of learning and encourage students to become autonomous learners. Perhaps the socio-cultural crisis could also be the reason for those in Sociology to focus on developing students' abilities to act as civilised citizens and live well with others in the community in order to not only prepare them for the complexity of life beyond university but also teach them to live for the public good. Similarly, the application of the HASS can be one of the responses to preserve the collective tradition of living for others in putting the self in relation to others and to train students to become more responsible for themselves and the community.

Arguably, the HCMU extra-curricular activities and Sociology lecturers' focus on citizenship education help nourish the humanistic aspect of LLL in university students. Also, the fact that most lecturers, especially those in the English department, were trying to help students learn independently and self-direct their learning clearly showed that to some extent they were preparing students for LLL. However, in all interviews at the two departments, no lecturer claimed what they were doing was for LLL. The reason might originate from the Vietnamese LLL perspectives, as analysed in the next section.

9.3.4 The Vietnamese LLL perspectives

In Vietnamese discourse, LLL refers to continuing education and belongs to the non-formal education sector, separated from the formal education system (Pham 2009; Pham and Tran 2009). Thus, LLL is attached with distance learning organised by open universities, vocational training, non-formal schooling programmes at lower secondary and upper-secondary levels, literacy and post-literacy courses, foreign language and IT courses, and so on, which seems to be unrelated to university education. As Dr. Hung, Dean of Sociology, posited:

> I feel that we shouldn't talk about LLL at university level because I think this happens beyond university. The main goal of university education is achieving the learning outcomes set by the university within the four year periods. Universities just equip students with background knowledge and skills so that they can upgrade their knowledge and skills later on; therefore, we can't expect that students are prepared for everything at university level.

That can explain why LLL was absent in the lecturers' interviews, yet it was one of the things they were trying to do through their teaching, assessment, and extra-curricular activities. Arguably, due to the separation of LLL from formal education and HE, it may be regarded as something that happens elsewhere and neglected in the University agenda, which can limit students' opportunities to be equipped with important capacities for LLL.

In brief, I have explained the similarities and differences between the UK and Vietnamese case in terms of *the national economic and HE contexts, assessment cultures and approaches, national social and cultural values,* and *the Vietnamese perspective on LLL*. The UK as a developed country and Vietnam as a developing country, the recent emphasis on formative assessment in the UK and the exam-dominant culture in Vietnam, the UK's focus on individuality and Vietnam's on collectivity, as well as the separation of LLL from HE in Vietnam – these broader contextual features influenced and shaped the differences and similarities in assessment in the two sites and helped explain why more elements of Boud's framework were found in the UK than in Vietnam. However, from the comparison, both cases showed incomplete pictures of Boud's framework (see Table 9.1); simultaneously, they also possessed features that the framework overlooked, which will be explored in the following section.

9.4 Reframing Boud's framework of sustainable assessment

I will now evaluate and reframe Boud's framework of *sustainable assessment* as an attempt to capture the complexity of educational reform which is possibly overlooked in the framework: different contexts present different challenges to reform. In doing so, I will attempt to answer these questions: How helpful is Boud's framework in looking at assessment in very different countries? Is the notion of assessment for LLL applicable in practice? What are its strengths and limitations for this research? I will also argue that Boud's framework of sustainable assessment designed in a Western context seems to apply more in the UK than the Vietnamese case, and thus it should be reframed in order to be more applicable in cross-national contexts.

How Boud's framework looks like in each case is influenced by the national economic, socio-cultural and HE contexts, assessment culture and approaches, and conditions that influence and shape the teaching and assessment policies, perspectives, and practices of each country. In the UK context, the framework will be something like Figure 9.1 below.

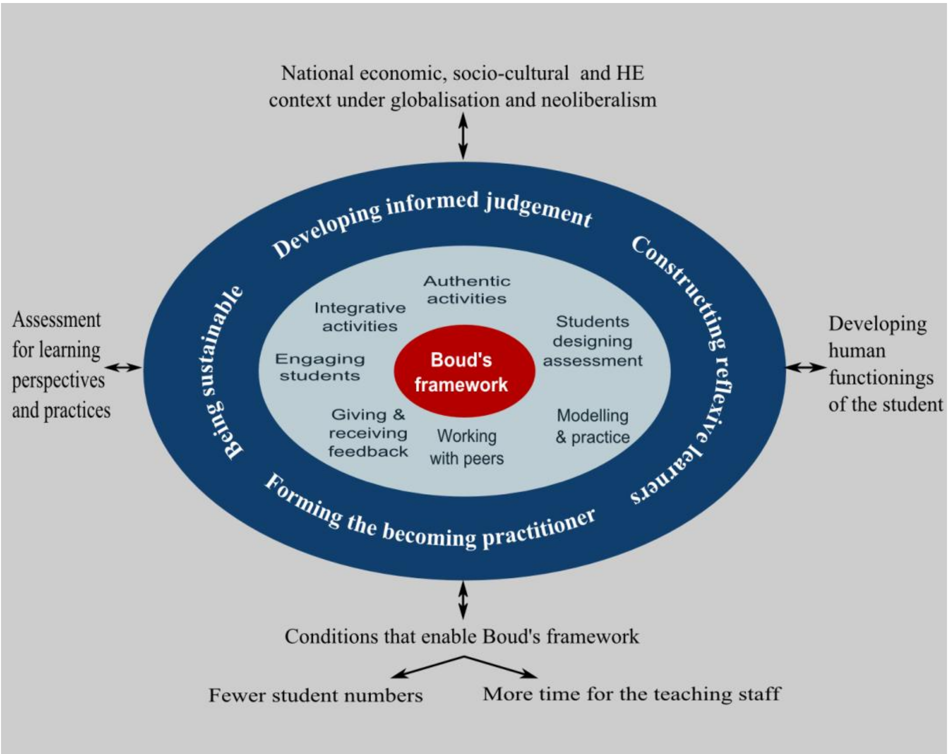

Figure 9.1 Boud's framework of sustainable assessment in the UK context

However, in the Vietnamese case, this framework will include some different components from the UK, as shown in Figure 9.2.

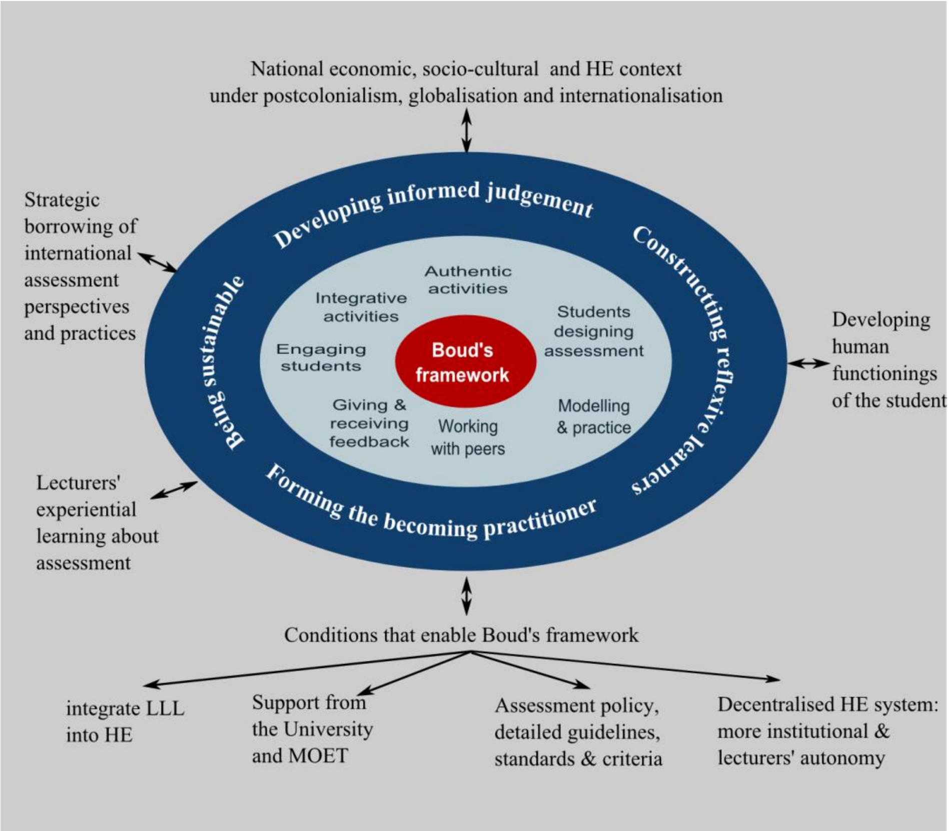

Figure 9.2 Boud's framework of sustainable assessment in the Vietnamese context

Although the analysis suggests that both cases present incomplete pictures of this framework, due to Boud’s own Western context, more elements can be seen in the UK. From the two figures, it is obvious that the UK case has more advantages in enabling Boud’s framework than the Vietnamese case. The UK conditions are mainly time and student numbers; yet in Vietnam, due to the contextual differences and constraints of HE, there are much more, namely having assessment policy with detailed guidelines, standards, and criteria, decentralisation of HE system to give institutions and lecturers more autonomy, support and encouragement from the centre, improving teaching and learning resources, initial and continuing PD, and integrate LLL into HE system. Arguably, that does not mean that Boud’s framework is unlikely to work in Vietnam and that people should wait until all conditions are met in order to apply it. The peer-feedback intervention, which is a response to Boud, shows that some of its elements can work effectively when tailored to be appropriate to the context and a few of these conditions are met in order for the application to be sustainable. Also, in spite of so many constraints, most lecturers in the two departments were trying to do things in and beyond this framework to help students learn not only their professional capacities but also informal ethical lessons to live well as part of the community. Thus, elements which are still missing or weak in the present practices of both the UK and Vietnam will potentially work if the HE conditions are improved and more changes are carried out. I will now move on to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Boud's framework for this research as a base for it to be reframed.

Strengths and limitations of Boud's framework for this research

One of the strengths of this framework is that it is multi-dimensional and includes both practical and theoretical dimensions. It not only looks at many different and important aspects of assessment practices: *engaging students, authentic activities, learning and judgement, giving and receiving feedback, working with peers*, and so on, but it also provides a theoretical base with four main features – *being sustainable, developing informed judgement, constructing reflexive learners,* and *forming the becoming practitioners*. Essentially, it brings about a new discourse of assessment, bridging assessment to LLL in arguing for another purpose of assessment – *preparing* *students for LLL*, in addition to the other two: *for certification* and *for supporting student learning at university*. Although not all elements and features are applied in both the UK and Vietnamese cases, the empirical data illustrates that the notion of assessment for LLL can be applicable in practice, and that the framework seems to be helpful for the two universities to reflect on, rethink and improve their policies and practices. The framework may also provide a vision for assessment at the two universities in the future – how assessment should be if it aims at not only supporting students' present learning but also preparing for LLL.

However, this framework is built in a Western context, thus it might work better in some contexts than others, as shown in the UK and Vietnamese cases. Also, there is not much emphasis on citizenship or relationships, which might be important 'functionings' – what the students are actually able to do and to be (Walker 2006) – as was the case in the Vietnamese context and was one of the focuses of both learning and assessment. Perhaps it might be useful here to explore the 'functioning' and 'human capabilities' in order to consider to what extent they are present in the two cases as the background to make *developing human capabilities* and *functionings* one of the components in the reworking of Boud's framework.

Illuminating ‘functionings’ and ‘human capabilities’ from the data

Evidence from the UK case suggests that, through teaching and assessment practices, students have been given the opportunities and freedom for ‘functionings’ along these four interlocking dimensions – becoming *critical thinkers*, *independent learners*, and *those who are employable* and *able to work cooperatively with others*. In fact, they could make their own choice of assessment topics and decide how they want to do them; they had opportunities to do group work, write critical and analytical essays; they were equipped with professional knowledge and transferable skills for employability, and so on. Therefore, one could argue that, to some extent, there were some attempts in the UK case to develop these four dimensions which might be called ‘functionings’ and human capabilities in order to have a richer human life.

Being multi-dimensional, the human capability approach has some resonance with Boud’s framework. If all elements in Boud’s framework happened together in the MU’s assessment practices, for example, students were engaged in learning and assessment activities, able to design assessment, to develop informed judgement and so on, one would expect that these functionings could contribute to being a rich human life. However, from the empirical evidence in the UK case, not all elements of the framework were present, some of them were still weak, and especially the ‘self’ was much more strongly focused than ‘others’; these show a limited set of functionings, or a ‘thin’ capabilities approach.

In the Vietnamese case, due to contextual differences, the traditional collective value that considered the group more important than the 'self' was highlighted. Thus, there seemed to be a richer focus on the relationship functionings, with a deeper cooperation which could be seen through teaching and extra-curricular activities with the integration of citizenship education that encourage students to care and be more responsible for others and contribute to the public good. Yet, similar to the MU, the HCMU also showed an incomplete picture of Boud's framework or a 'thin' capability approach which, as one might argue, is important to human development in both cases. Especially, under the 'invasion' of international, especially Western culture due to globalisation and internationalisation, Vietnam needs to focus on human development which subsumes economic development, but is not superceded by the economy.

Given the strengths and limitations of Boud's framework and the importance of human capabilities and functionings in both cases, one might argue for it to be reframed to include a more expansive version of LLL, with concerns for the development of human capabilities and functionings and the components that may help capture the complexity of assessment in different countries, such as the national economic, socio-cultural and HE context, assessment culture and approaches, conditions that enable the framework, as shown in Figure 9.3. With these features, this adapted framework tends to be more expansive and can be used in different contexts, compared to the ones in Figures 9.1 and 9.2.

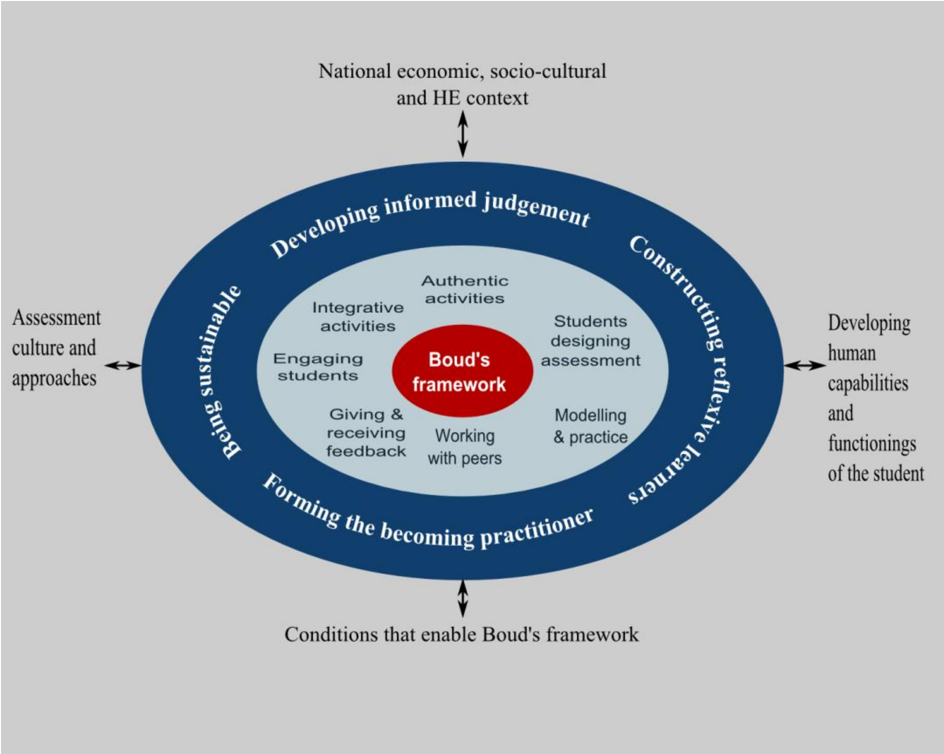

Figure 9.3 Reframing Boud's framework of sustainable assessment

To sum up, in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Boud’s framework for this research, it is clear that the framework is useful for looking at assessment in different countries and can provide a vision for the two cases to improve their assessment policy and practice towards supporting both learning at university and LLL. However, as built in a Western context, this framework might not fully capture the complexity and variations of national contexts, especially those belong to the non-western world, and insufficient attention has been paid to developing human capabilities and functionings for the public good. As such, it has been reframed with the inclusion of these features.

9. 5 Conclusion

This chapter has compared and contrasted assessment in the two cases through their key assessment features and the lens of Boud's framework. The similarities and differences have been explained by the influences of the national economic and HE context, assessment culture and approaches, socio-cultural values, and the Vietnamese perspective on LLL. Overall, more elements of Boud's framework were found in the UK than the Vietnamese University; however, it also emerged from the analysis that the UK case seemed to take a more 'reductive' LLL approach in focusing on the development of the 'self', whereas in the Vietnamese case, a more 'expansive' approach of LLL could be seen through an emphasis on 'otherness'. On this basis, Boud's framework has been reframed to include assessment cultures and approaches and national socio-economic and HE contexts. Such reframing also links Boud's idea of sustainable assessment that assessment in HE should aim at supporting both learning at university and LLL with a more expansive version of LLL that emphasises the development of human capabilities and functionings of the student in order to have a richer human life. Thus, this adapted framework may provide more flexibility for use in different national contexts.

10 Chapter ten: Conclusion

10. 1 Introduction

Chapter nine compared and explained the differences and similarities of the UK and Vietnamese cases, as well as reframing Boud's framework of sustainable assessment to include the development of human functionings and to be more flexible in different socio-economic and cultural contexts. This chapter will provide a summary of the thesis, its implications for policies and practices, its contributions and limitations, and suggest further research. Because the UK case is used as an example for potential changes in Vietnam, more focus will be put on implications for the Vietnamese assessment policies and practices than the UK. However, this does not mean that only the Vietnamese case can gain benefits from the study. Indeed, each institution can learn from the other, and this research is beneficial for MU as well as HCMU. The study does not seek generalisations; instead, through the implications drawn from a particular comparative portrayal of assessment at the two UK and Vietnamese universities, it invites readers to infer or link these cases to their own circumstances.

The thesis addressed five research questions, which are repeated here for clarity:

1. What are the features of current assessment policies at the level of the University and in Social Science and Humanities undergraduate programmes under conditions of globalisation and internationalised HE at

the MU – UK and the HCMU – Vietnam in respect of

(i) student learning

(ii) assessment and desirable graduate outcomes

(iii) assessment and LLL.

2. What are the assessment philosophies and practices of lecturers in selected Social Science and Humanities departments of the MU and the HCMU in relation to

   (i) student learning

   (ii) desirable graduate outcomes

   (iii) LLL

3. What are student experiences of assessment at selected departments of the two universities? In what way (if at all) has assessment developed them as lifelong learners?
4. How do we explain the similarities and differences of these assessment policies, philosophies and practices, and the impact and effect for student learning? Which conceptual framework provides robust explanatory power?
5. In the light of these similarities and differences, to what extent is Boud's framework of sustainable assessment useful theoretically and operationally for the two case study contexts, and as a guide to improving practices?

The comparison of the two cases highlighted variations of assessment in the two national contexts, one in the West and the other in the East with different assessment cultures and approaches. In the UK case, assessment was characterised by a tension between the University senior managers' neoliberal viewpoint and lecturers' educational perspective on assessment, with a strong focus on feedback and the development of critical, independent, creative, cooperative and employable graduates as key learning outcomes in both Sociology and English undergraduate programmes. In the Vietnamese case, although assessment was traditionally exam-based, there were signs of reforms with the implementation of strategic assessment practices borrowed from the West and an emphasis on group work in learning and assessment activities. However, the greatest difference is the focus on individualistic values in the UK case, and collective values in the Vietnamese case. However, across the two cases, where East meets West can be seen in common values shared by UK and Vietnamese lecturers: their emphasis on intrinsic learning and commitment to support students to become good professionals and citizens in future. Viewed through the lens of Boud's framework, assessment in both cases was an imperfect realisation of it although more elements were found at MU than at HCMU. These similarities and differences of assessment perspectives, policies, and practices were explained in terms of national contexts, socio-economic situations, history, cultural values of the West and the East. The argument was made that Boud's framework can offer a vision for the two cases to aim at changes in their assessment perspective and practices. However, it should also be reframed to include contextual and cultural features of assessment, as well as the development of human capabilities and functionings in order to be more applicable in different national contexts.

The reworking on Boud's framework with the inclusion of human capabilities and functionings may encompass a fuller range of HE goals discussed earlier in the thesis: 'for economic wealth and individual prosperity; for individual fulfilment and transformation; and for citizenship in a democracy' (Booth *et al.* 2009: 929). It takes a more expansive and humanistic view of pedagogy and LLL that aims at not only developing the individual who is critical, creative, independent, and reflexive, but also nurturing their concerns and responsibility for others in community and society (Barnett 2006; McLean 2006; Walker 2012). Thus, the adapted framework emphasises the formation of intellectual and moral functionings for the individual in order to become the better 'self' and be able to make contribution to society.

10.2 Implications for policy and practice

In exploring what is happening in assessment in the MU and the HCMU on a comparative basis and through the lens of Boud's framework, this study suggests some significant implications for policy and practice. The analysis of the findings, using four conceptual features and eight key practical elements of Boud's framework, calls for the need to reconceptualise assessment discourse to include preparing students for LLL, put LLL into the learning and assessment policy, and make it an important learning goal and important outcome of the whole programme in both cases. This will serve as the grounds to reframe teaching, learning, and assessment towards meeting both HE learning and LLL requirements. However, due to the assessment differences, each case may move towards sustainable assessment differently.

10.2.1 Implications for the UK case

The findings indicate that the UK case has a well-established and well-monitored assessment regime with detailed guidelines for practices, lecturers' educational perspective on assessment, good resources and ICT. These provide advantageous conditions for applying more of Boud's framework in the university's policy and practices. However, making LLL a key learning goal and focus of learning and assessment requires more amendments of policy and changes in learning and assessment practices. This cannot be done without senior managers' change of their arguably neoliberal mindset compromising lecturers' educational perspective; both managers and lecturers need to consider the preparation for genuine and sustainable LLL important in HE. This also requires an alignment between HE curriculum, learning outcomes, and teaching, learning and assessment with LLL, as Boud (2010a) remarks. Among the four main assessment features of Boud's framework, the evidence suggests that more emphasis should be put on developing 'informed judgement' and reflexivity, which can be carried out with more peer assessment and self-assessment tasks, reflective practices, as well as different learning and assessment activities integrated in all stages of the programme. Also, the departments' concentration on giving more and better feedback proves to be an effective way to support student learning, and it is important to continue such practice. However, it seems that students need more face-to-face and staged feedback on the drafts of their assignments.

Most importantly, the biased focus on developing the 'self' or individualistic values in the findings shows a definite need of balancing it with ‘others’ or collective values. Such balance between ‘self’ and ‘others’ becomes increasingly important if we aim to prepare students to not only be employable, but also to face an age of ‘supercomplexity’ and foster human capabilities, citizenship, and lifelong learning (Barnett 2006; Walker 2012). As Booth *et al.* (2009) argue, university education should aim at forming not only learners’ autonomy, but also the capacity for effective cooperation with others, social awareness and responsibility. As such, the HCMU system can offer the MU system a perspective on the benefits of collective values, emphasised through the teaching and learning process and extra-curricular activities. Especially, the HCMU’s implementation of the Holistic Assessment of the Student’s Self-improvement (HASS) is an example of not only encouraging holistic assessment but also educating students to take responsibility for others and make contributions to society.

10.2.2 Implications for the Vietnamese case

The evidence shows some strengths of the Vietnamese case that need to be preserved and promoted: the lecturers’ strong commitment and desire to change their practices to help students improve their learning in spite of many constraints and challenges, their strategic use of borrowed assessment practices with careful considerations of contexts and cultures, their emotional concerns and care for students, and the implementation of the HASS. Most importantly, their emphasis on forming collective values for students – educating them to live well in community and to show concerns for other people – should be encouraged and considered as one of the key learning goals in university education, as well as integrated in the curricula and the teaching, learning, and assessment process. Especially when these values are in danger of being diminished in the contemporary Vietnamese society, nurturing and developing these traditional values in education is significant in order to retain national and cultural values and identities. All of these provide advantages for potential assessment reforms towards sustainable assessment.

However, the study also implies the necessity for the Vietnamese university to make changes, and findings about assessment in the UK may bring about important implications for Vietnam in the change process. Its policies, assessment guidelines, standards and criteria may provide good examples for Vietnam to look at, compare the assessment regime, strategically select, and adapt what can be appropriate to the Vietnamese context in order to establish detailed guidelines and written sets of standards and criteria for assessment that the Vietnamese university still lacks. This will help Vietnamese lecturers assess students based on standards and criteria rather than on their own intuitive judgement, and thus may reduce subjectivity and make the marking process fairer to students. In addition, the UK experience on choosing and aligning assessment tasks with the learning outcomes of the course and the whole programme can also be selectively applied in Vietnam. In terms of assessment practices, the UK assessment tasks that develop criticality, reflexivity, and capacity for judgement may be borrowed and adjusted to be suitable for the Vietnamese context. The results from the peer-feedback intervention at the HCMU prove that such strategically borrowed practices may work in Vietnam.

With the weak presence of some elements of Boud's framework in the research findings, especially in forming reflexive, autonomous learners and the judgement ability, the Vietnam university needs to do a lot more to change its policy and practices. The most important thing is to reconceptualise the discourse of LLL, which is perceived to be completely separated from HE, so as to closely connect with HE. This can serve a base to design policies and strategies to move towards sustainable assessment. Significantly, the MOET and the University Management Board need to support and encourage lecturers to make changes in their teaching and assessment in terms of policies, reward systems, facilities, and PD. Constraints found in HCMU call for decentralising the top-down management system, and shifting from controlling to supporting lecturers and students. Accordingly, the assessment regime and regulations should be more flexible and give lecturers more autonomy, and it is necessary to have more dialogues between policy makers and lecturers about teaching, learning, and assessment policies and practices. In addition, lecturers' demands for PD assessment courses at the HCMU should also be met with the launch of initial and continuing PD courses taught by assessment specialists at or outside the university. Upgrading teaching and learning facilities, especially the library system, is also required. Above all, increasing the present low salaries for lecturers is an urgent action that should be done immediately so that they can concentrate and spend more time on teaching and doing research at the university instead of teaching many other extra courses outside to earn money for their living expenses. If the salary problem in public universities is not solved, it may be very difficult to start or sustain any reform.

10.3 Contributions of the study

This is an original research project that uses Boud's framework to look at assessment in HE on a comparative basis, and thus it has significant contributions to knowledge. The study both applies and develops Boud's framework and deepens readers' understanding about sustainable assessment and how it can be operationalised and reframed to be more applicable in different national contexts. Thus, it may contribute to the international development of contemporary assessment theories and practices. Essentially, the key contribution of the study is that it is comparative. As Crossley and Watson (2003) remark, comparative research contributes to providing policy makers, educators, and researchers with better understanding of their own educational system and serving as guidance to educational development and reform. This study is no exception. Its findings and explanations about assessment in the UK and Vietnamese cases in terms of socio-economic, historic, and cultural contexts can help both universities reflect upon and make further changes in their learning and assessment practices. Most importantly, the findings can serve as good examples for shaping and guiding assessment reform in Vietnamese universities as the core to redesign the curriculum, teaching, and learning in order to equip students with real-life knowledge and skills. This is necessary for their future life and for the development of the country. Also, the findings, when applied, may potentially move assessment in Vietnamese universities towards contemporary assessment theories and practices, thus may close the gaps between international and Vietnamese HE. Therefore, the study may be useful to the development of student assessment in both the UK and Vietnamese cases, and hopefully it may also be useful more widely in the UK and Vietnam.

10.4 Further research

The study is narrowed down to investigating assessment in English and Sociology departments of the two universities. However, it has thrown up many issues that possibly need to be explored in future research. The research can be expanded to other subject disciplines in social sciences in both UK and Vietnamese HE, or a comparison among different subject disciplines within universities in one country. Also, action research on applying elements of Boud's framework in changing HE assessment practices in the UK or Vietnamese universities can be carried out. It would also be interesting to explore the alignment between HE learning and assessment and LLL in the UK and Vietnam. Especially, the findings of the Vietnamese case may provide insights for a number of further research on LLL in Vietnam and how to integrate LLL into Vietnamese HE or on curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment reform towards preparing students for LLL.

In summarising the findings and exploring its implications for policy and practice, contributions and limitations, as well as further research which can be followed, the study invites readers to think about and discuss the following issues: How helpful is the adapted framework developed through this research in looking at assessment for expansive LLL in different countries? Is the notion of sustainable assessment easily applicable in practice? Given the applicability of the adapted framework, how should assessment policies be changed to support its implementation? These questions are of critical importance because HE in both developed and developing countries needs to nurture well-rounded people for not only the purposes of personal and economic development, but also of expansive LLL and contributions to a better society.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Letter to MU's Head of Department

Dear Professor X,

My name is Tham Nguyen. I am a student from Vietnam, conducting research for my PhD dissertation on '*Assessing Student Learning in Selected Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study*' in the School of Education at Nottingham. My research aims to investigate the similarities and differences in assessment policy, philosophy and practices in relation to desirable graduate outcomes and lifelong learning at two departments in the Midlands University and the Ho Chi Minh City University – Vietnam. From the identification and explanation of these similarities and differences, I hope this study will contribute in some way to the development of Vietnamese higher education, and also be useful to Midlands.

I am hoping to collect data from the departments of English Studies and Sociology and Social Policy at Midlands. Therefore, I am writing to request your permission to do research in your department. This will include interviewing up to six lecturers (for around an hour each) whom you feel would have interesting things to say about assessment in the department. In particular I would like to ask about their assessment approach, their practices and experiences. I will make all arrangements to meet staff. In addition, I hope to speak to a small number of students and would like permission to display a poster asking for volunteers. I would also like to ask the staff I interview for their help, for example allowing me to briefly speak to their students at the end of a lecture.

I would greatly appreciate your permission to do this research and suggestions of names of lecturers for me to contact.

Yours sincerely,

Tham Nguyen

Appendix 2 Letter to MU's lecturers

Dear Dr X,

My name is Tham Nguyen. I am a student from Vietnam, conducting research for my PhD dissertation on '*Assessing Student Learning in Selected Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study*' in the School of Education at Nottingham. My research aims to investigate the similarities and differences in assessment policy, philosophy and practices in relation to desirable graduate outcomes and lifelong learning at two departments in the Midlands University and the Ho Chi Minh City University – Vietnam. From the identification and explanation of these similarities and differences, I hope this study will contribute in some way to the development of Vietnamese higher education, and also be useful to Midlands.

In order to conduct this case study I am collecting data in the departments of English Studies and Sociology and Social Policy. Would you be willing to find time for a 60-minute interview about your assessment approach, practices and experiences, as well as about teaching, learning and assessment policies in your department, at a time that suits you between now and the Christmas break?

Your personal details will be anonymised and kept confidential, and the interview transcripts will be used only for the purposes of this study. This data will only be available to myself and will not be passed onto any third parties. It will, however, be discussed with my supervisors, Professor Melanie Walker and Dr Monica McLean who will equally respect the confidentiality of the interview and interviewee. I shall also prepare a suitable consent form for you to sign before the interview starts. At any time during the interview, if you decide you do not wish to answer any further questions you are free to withdraw.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at ttxtn1@notttingham.ac.uk

Thank you very much for your help and support.

Yours sincerely,

Tham Nguyen

Appendix 3 Student focus group poster for the MU

The University of Nottingham

School of Education

Are you willing to share your views about being assessed with me?

My name is Tham Nguyen. I am a student from Vietnam, conducting research for my PhD dissertation on '*Assessing Student Learning in Selected Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study*', in the School of Education here at Nottingham.

In order to conduct this case study I am collecting data in the departments of **English Studies** and **Sociology and Social Policy**, and I am going to conduct a focus group interview with around **six final year students**. Would you therefore be willing to find time for a focus group interview about your assessment experiences and about how you would like to be assessed?

Your personal details will be anonymized and kept confidential. I shall also ask you to sign a suitable consent form before the interview starts. At any time during the interview, if you decide you do not wish to answer any further questions you are free to withdraw.

FINALLY, EACH PARTICIPANT IN THIS RESEARCH WILL RECEIVE £10 CASH.

If you are interested in taking part or if you require further information you can contact me by email at **ttxtn1@notttingham.ac.uk** **or text your name & email address to 0794 3007 888** to confirm your interest.

07943 007888	07943 007888	07943 007888	07943 007888	07943 007888	07943 007888	07943 007888	07943 007888

Appendix 4 Interview schedules at the MU

Name	Position	Time
School of Sociology and Social Policy		
1. Dr. Darcy	Director of Undergraduate studies & lecturer	16pm, Wednesday, 4th Nov., 2009
2. Dr. Bennett	Undergraduate convenor & university teacher	11 am, Tuesday, 17th Nov., 2009
3. Dr. Fielding	Director of Teaching & lecturer	10 am, Wednesday 25 th Nov., 2009
4. Dr. Maguire	Lecturer	3:30 pm Friday 27th Nov., 2009
5. Dr. Jones	Lecturer	12 pm, Thursday, 19th November 2009
Student focus group: Una, Mark, Tom and Daniel	Final year students	3pm Thursday, December 10th , 2009
School of English Studies		
1. Dr. Grant	Director of Undergraduate programme & lecturer	3pm, Monday 9th Nov., 2009
2. Dr. Curtis	Director of Undergraduate examinations	9am, Tuesday 24th Nov., 2009
3. Prof. Davies	Professor	12:00 Tuesday 15 December, 2009
4. Dr. Alconbury	Lecturer	3pm Wednesday 3rd Feb., 2010
5. Dr. Firth	Lecturer	9am Thursday 4th Feb, 2010
Student focus group: Bridget, Jude, Molly, Jenny, Jodie, Helen, Jackie	Final year students	3 pm, Thursday 21st Jan.. 2010
The University Head of Assessment	**The University Head of Assessment**	2pm Wednesday 2nd December 2009

Appendix 5 Letter to the departmental Management Board of the HCMU

To: The Management Board of Faculty of Sociology/ English – Ho Chi Minh City University – Vietnam.

My name is Nguyen Thi Hong Tham. I am a lecturer in Vietnam. I am now conducting research for my PhD dissertation on '*Assessing Student Learning in Selected Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study*', supervised by Professor Melanie Walker and Dr. Monica McLean – School of Education – University of Nottingham – UK. My research aims to investigate the similarities and differences in assessment policy, perspectives and practices in relation to desirable graduate outcomes and lifelong learning at two departments in the Midlands University and the Ho Chi Minh City University (HCMU) – Vietnam.

I am hoping to collect data from the faculties of English Studies and Sociology and Social Policy at the HCMU. Therefore, I am writing to request your permission to do research in your faculty. This will include interviewing five lecturers (for around an hour each) about their assessment approach, their practices and experiences. In addition, I hope to speak to around six students. To maintain confidentiality, the name of our university and names of lecturers and students who agree to take part in this study will be changed, and the interview transcripts will be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this study.

I would greatly appreciate your permission to do this research at your faculty.

Main supervisor	Nottingham March 24^{th},
2010	Yours respectfully,
Professor Melanie Walker	**Nguyen Thi Hong Tham**
Professor of Higher Education,	
Director of Research, School of Education,	
Jubilee Campus, University of Nottingham	
Nottingham NG8 1BB	

Letter to the Management Board of the departments of the HCMU in Vietnamese

Kính gửi: Ban chủ nhiệm khoa Xã hội học/Ngữ Văn Anh , HCMU

Tôi tên: Nguyễn Thị Hồng Thắm, là giảng viên đại học tại Việt Nam. Tôi đang thực hiện đề tài nghiên cứu cho luận văn tiến sĩ của tôi với chủ đề: *'Nghiên cứu so sánh trường hợp về đánh giá học tập của sinh viên các chương trình Khoa học xã hội và Nhân Văn tại các trường đại học Anh Quốc và Việt Nam'* do giáo sư Melanie Walker và tiến sĩ Monica McLean – Trường Giáo Dục – Đại học Nottingham – Vương Quốc Anh – hướng dẫn. Đề tài này nhằm nghiên cứu sự giống nhau và khác nhau về chính sách, quan điểm và thực trạng đánh giá sinh viên trong mối tương quan với kết quả đầu ra và vấn đề học tập suốt đời tại hai khoa – Khoa Xã Hội Học và khoa Ngữ Văn Anh của trường Đại học Nottingham và Đại học Tp. HCM.

Vì vậy, tôi làm đơn này kính xin Ban chủ nhiệm khoa cho phép tôi được thu thập dữ liệu nghiên cứu tại Quý Khoa, bao gồm: phỏng vấn 5 giảng viên (mỗi giảng viên khoảng 1 giờ) và phỏng vấn nhóm 6 sinh viên năm cuối. **Để bảo mật**, **tên của trường Đại học và tên của giảng viên và sinh viên tham gia vào nghiên cứu này sẽ được thay đổi. Dữ liệu thu được sẽ được giữ bí mật và chỉ sử dụng cho mục đích nghiên cứu của đề tài này**.

Trong khi chờ đợi sự chấp thuận của Quý Khoa, tôi xin chân thành cảm ơn.

Xác nhận của Giáo sư hướng dẫn chính	Nottingham, 24/3/2010
(Ký tên, đóng dấu)	Kính đơn,
Giáo sư Melanie Walker	**Nguyễn Thị Hồng Thắm**
Giáo sư về Giáo dục Đại học	Nghiên cứu sinh tiến sĩ
Giám đốc Nghiên cứu	
Trường Giáo Dục, Vương Quốc Anh	

Appendix 6 Interview schedules at the HCMU

Name	Position	Time
Department of Sociology		
Dr.Hung	Dean	9am, Tuesday, May 4th, 2010
Dr. Hoa	Lecturer	10am, Monday, April, 26th, 2010
Ms.Yen	lecturer	9am, Tuesday, April 20th, 2010
Ms.Huong	Lecturer	10:30, Friday, June 4th, 2010
Mr. Tan	Lecturer	10am, Tuesday, June 1th, 2010
Student focus group: Thao, Ha, Lan, Hai, Ngoc, Le	Final year students	2pm, Monday, April 3rd, 2010
Department of English		
1. Dr. Mai	Dean	9 am, Tuesday June, 6th, 2010
2. Dr. Lam	Vice-dean	11 am, Thursday, June, 10th, 2010
3. Ms. Phuong	Lecturer	
4. Mr.Minh	Lecturer	2pm Wednesday, April 28th, 2010
5. Ms.Chi	lecturer	10am, Tuesday, April, 27th, 2010
Student focus group: Kien, Kim, Trang, Huy, Ly, Mai		2pm, Friday, May 7th, 2010
Student focus group in the peer feedback intervention: Long, Lan, Ly, Quy, Phung.		3pm Tuesday, May 11th, 2010
Dr. Kim	The University Head of Assessment	3pm, Wednesday May 12th, 2010

Appendix 7 Lists of policy documents in the two cases

The MU	The HCMU
QAA' s Code of Practice – Section 6: Assessment of students. The Burgress Report. The MU's Quality Manual. The MU's Learning and Teaching Strategies 2007–2012; 2011–2015. Teaching at the MU 2010. General information about the University 2011 (from the MU's website). The MU's strategic Plan 2010–2015. University Newsletter, Spring 2010. Sociology undegraduate student handbook 2009-2010. Sociology's undergraduate studies brochure. Sociology Module Catalogues 2009–2010. Sociology Three Year Plan 2009/2010–2011/2012. Sociology module-based generic feedback. English undegraduate studies brochure. English Module Catalogues 2009–2010. English Module feedback 2010. Producing assessed coursework: A guide for English Undergraduate and Masters students. Feedback and attendance Review (2009): Policy Document – English.	MOET's Resolution on Organising HE teaching, learning, and Assessment for Regular Students (Resolution 4) in 1999. MOET's Resolution 31 – Regarding to Piloting HE teaching, learning, and assessment in the Credit-based System for Regular Students in 2001. Resolution on Organising HE Teaching and Learning for Regular Students (Resolution 25) in 2006. MOET's Resolution on HE Training in the Credit-based System for Regular Students (Resolution 43) in 2007. MOET's Resolution on Holistic Assessment of the Student's Self-improvement in 2007. The HCMU's strategic plan 2011-2015. General information about the University on the HCMU's website 2011. The HCMU' regulations on training in the credit-based system for regular students 2009. Sociology Course description 2009–2010. Sociology Self-Evaluation Report 2009. Sociology Student Survey Report 2009–2010. English Course Description 2009–2010. English Self-Evaluation Report 2009. English Student Survey Report 2009–2010.

Appendix 8 An example of data analysis

	Sub-themes and notes	**Themes**
Dr. Green: All of our modules in the first year and the second year are team-taught, so the module team will sit down and agree on what the assessment is going to be, how the students are going to be assessed and all of the work in the second year is moderated. And everything is marked by the first marker, and examples goes on to other staff in the school to be moderated it to make sure the staff will find it consistently thought, and all our third year work is fully double marked, so we have two members of staff looking at the same piece, and of course, there's samples of all the work of students across level will go to the external examiners as well, so from module to module, there's an opportunity to emphasise different points, that's made clear in the assessment, and then in terms of different between markers, we tend to minimise that as much as possible through moderation and double mark. Tham: Could you explain why there are single markers and double markers? Dr. Green: it's because the amount of weighting recorded to each year, so our third year is weighted slightly heavier than our second year, that's a part of the reason, the other thing is that most or all the modules are team-taught anyway, so there's less scope there for personal area because you've got at least four people generally doing the marking on a module. And we have tutors marking for seminar and group work, and then that will go to another moderator who makes sure that all the tutors do the marking at the same level. Most of our third year modules are taught by individual members of the staff, so they're very much concentrated around individual member researching interest. So in that situation, it's only the individual staff, so we think it's important to have somebody looking at all of the work there, and of course, in that situation, the external functions as the moderator there. There's always a balance as well between the amount of time that we can reasonably invest in the marking process as well, as we take on more students, so time constraint becomes more difficult to do the double marking. But it is important that we have that consistency approach.	***Mark moderation and double marking*** ***Reasons for double marking*** ***Time constraint***	**Marking**

Appendix 9 Participant consent form

Project title: 'Assessing Student Learning in selected Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study'

Researcher: Tham Nguyen

Supervisors: Professor Melanie Walker, Dr. Monica McLean

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal details will remain confidential.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped during the interview and that the interview will be transcribed in full.
- I understand that data will be stored in a secure database. They will only be used for the purposes of this study, only be available to the researcher and will not be passed onto any third parties.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I have any concerns relating to my involvement in the research.

Signed ……………………………………………………(research participant)

Print name ………………………………………… **Date** …………………

Contact details

Researcher: Tham Nguyen
Room C4, School of Education, The University of Nottingham,
Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham, NG8 1BB.
Email: ttxtn1@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisors: Professor Melanie Walker (Melanie.Walker@nottingham.ac.uk)
Dr. Monica McLean (Monica.Mclean@nottingham.ac.uk)

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator:

educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Participant consent form in Vietnamese

BẢN ĐỒNG Ý THAM GIA PHỎNG VẤN

Tên đề tài :*Nghiên cứu so sánh trường hợp về đánh giá học tập của sinh viên các chương trình Khoa học xã hội và Nhân Văn tại các trường đại học Anh Quốc và Việt Nam*

Nghiên cứu sinh: Nguyễn Thị Hồng Thắm

Giáo sư hướng dẫn: Giáo sư Melanie Walker và tiến sĩ Monica McLean

- Tôi đã đọc bản thông tin cho người tham gia nghiên cứu và tính chất, mục đích của đề tài nghiên cứu đã được giải thích cho tôi. Tôi hiểu rõ và đồng ý tham gia.
- Tôi hiểu rõ mục đích nghiên cứu và sự tham gia của tôi vào đề tài này.
- Tôi biết rằng tôi có thể rút lui khỏi đề tài nghiên cứu bất cứ lúc nào.
- Tôi biết rằng khi thông tin của đề tài nghiên cứu được xuất bản, tên và những chi tiết cá nhân của tôi sẽ được bảo mật.
- Tôi biết rằng cuộc phỏng vấn sẽ được ghi âm và toàn bộ cuộc phỏng vấn sẽ được ghi lại đầy đủ.
- Tôi biết rằng dữ liệu sẽ được bảo mật và chỉ được dùng bởi nghiên cứu sinh cho mục đích nghiên cứu của đề tài này và không được chuyển cho bất cứ người nào khác.
- Tôi biết rằng tôi có thể liên hệ với nghiên cứu sinh hoặc giáo sư hướng dẫn nếu tôi muốn biết thêm thông tin về đề tài nghiên cứu và liên hệ với người phụ trách về Đạo đức nghiên cứu nếu tôi có bất kỳ thắc mắc nào liên quan đến sự tham gia của tôi trong đề tài này.

Người tham gia nghiên cứu

Chữ ký:--

Họ và Tên: --- Ngày tháng: -----------------

Chi tiết liên hệ:

Nghiên cứu sinh: Nguyễn Thị Hồng Thắm, Room C4, School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham, NG8 1BB. Email: ttxtn1@nottingham.ac.uk

Giáo sư hướng dẫn: Professor Melanie Walker (Melanie.Walker@nottingham.ac.uk)
Dr. Monica McLean (Monica.Mclean@nottingham.ac.uk)

Người phụ trách về Đạo đức Nghiên cứu – Trường Giáo Dục – Đại học Nottingham
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 10 Letter to lecturers of the HCMU

To: Dr. X – Faculty of Sociology/English – The Ho Chi Minh City University

My name is Nguyen Thi Hong Tham. I am a lecturer in Vetnam. I am now conducting research for my PhD dissertation on '*Assessing Student Learning in Selected Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes at Universities in the UK and Vietnam: A Comparative Case Study*', supervised by Professor Melanie Walker and Dr. Monica McLean – School of Education – University of Nottingham – UK. My research aims to investigate the similarities and differences in assessment policy, perspectives and practices in relation to desirable graduate outcomes and lifelong learning at two departments in the Midlands University and the Ho Chi Minh City University – Vietnam.

In order to conduct this case study I am collecting data in your faculty with the permission of the Management Board. Would you be willing to find time for a 60-minute interview about your assessment approach, practices and experiences, as well as about teaching, learning and assessment policies in your faculty?

To maintain confidentiality, the name of our university and names of lecturers and students who agree to take part in this study will be changed, and the interview transcripts will be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this study. I shall also prepare a suitable consent form for you to sign before the interview starts. At any time during the interview, if you decide you do not wish to answer any further questions you are free to withdraw.

Thank you very much for your help and support.

Yours sincerely,

Tham Nguyen

Letter to lecturers of the HCMU (in Vietnamese)

Kính gửi : Quý thầy cô khoa Xã hội học/ Ngữ Văn Anh, trường Đại học Tp. HCM

Tôi tên: Nguyễn Thị Hồng Thắm,là giảng viên đại học tại Việt Nam. Tôi đang thực hiện đề tài nghiên cứu cho luận văn tiến sĩ của tôi với chủ đề: *'Nghiên cứu so sánh trường hợp về đánh giá học tập của sinh viên các chương trình Khoa học xã hội và Nhân Văn tại các trường đại học Anh Quốc và Việt Nam'* do giáo sư Melanie Walker và tiến sĩ Monica McLean – Trường Giáo Dục – Đại học Nottingham – Vương Quốc Anh – hướng dẫn. Đề tài này nhằm nghiên cứu sự giống nhau và khác nhau về chính sách, quan điểm và thực trạng đánh giá sinh viên trong mối tương quan với kết quả đầu ra và vấn đề học tập suốt đời tại hai khoa – Khoa Xã Hội Học và khoa Ngữ Văn Anh của trường Đại học Midlands và Đại học Tp. HCM.

Được sự đồng ý của Ban chủ nhiệm khoa, tôi đang tiến hành thu thập dữ liệu cho đề tài nghiên cứu này. Kính xin Qúy thầy cô cho phép tôi được phỏng vấn khoảng 60 phút về *Quan điểm, cách thực hiện và kinh nghiệm đánh giá sinh viên* của Quý thầy cô cũng như *chính sách giảng dạy, học tập và đánh giá của Quý Khoa.*

Để bảo mật, **tên của trường Đại học và tên của Quý thầy cô và sinh viên tham gia vào nghiên cứu này sẽ được thay đổi. Dữ liệu thu được sẽ được giữ bí mật và chỉ sử dụng cho mục đích nghiên cứu của đề tài này**.Tôi cũng xin phép Quý thầy cô ký vào bản đồng ý tham gia phỏng vấn.Trong lúc phỏng vấn, Quý thầy cô có thể quyết định ngừng cuộc phỏng vấn bất cứ lúc nào.

Tôi xin chân thành cảm ơn sự giúp đỡ của Quý thầy cô.

Tp.HCM, 15/4/2010

Nguyễn Thị Hồng Thắm

Nghiên cứu sinh tiến sĩ

Trường Giáo Dục – Đại học Nottingham

Vương Quốc Anh, Nottingham NG8 1BB

Appendix 11 Interview questions in the MU case (for lecturers)

1. Let's talk about assessment in one typical module you are teaching. • **How do you assess your students in this module**? • **Why** do you do that way? • **What** do you **want students to learn**? • Given what you want students to learn, **how** do your **assessment tasks support** this student learning? • **How successful** is your assessment in supporting this student learning?	**Assessment approach and practices**
2. Are there **opportunities for reflection, self-assessment and peer assessment** in your module? 3. How do you give **feedback** to your students? • Do students get a chance for **formative feedback** so that they can improve their work before they hand in? • How does your feedback **encourage students to learn** and be **successful**?	**Self-assessment and peer assessment** **Feedback**
4. What about the **final year dissertation**? How important is that for learning? Is it a good method of assessment?	**Final year dissertation**
5. How do your **assessment tasks** help prepare students for **learning in the longer term**, if at all?	**Assessment and lifelong learning**
6. Are there any **alternative approaches to assessment** that you would like to try? **Does anything stand on the way**?	**Alternative assessment**
7. Is there anything about student assessment policies, practices and your own assessment that we haven't covered that you would like to discuss?	**Further information**

Interview questions in the MU case (for senior managers)

Can you tell me what you do as... (Director of teaching)?	**prompts**
1. Does your school have a **formal assessment policy**? (**If not, how do you discuss and agree on assessment criteria and standards, as well as student learning?)** 2. How does the school **arrive** at these **policies**? Are all the staff aware of these policies? Do they take part in developing these policies?	**Assessment policy**
3. How are the policies **implemented**? What **success** do they bring about? What still needs to be **changed** or **adjusted**?	**Policy implementation**
4. Can you give me an **overview** about **assessment practices** at your school? **In general**, how do the staff assess their students? • What about the **final year dissertation**? How important is that for learning? Is it a good method of assessment? • How much **autonomy** do the staff have in assessing their students?	**Overview of assessment practices** **Staff autonomy in assessment**
5. How do your school assessment policies and practices help **improve the staff's teaching, learning, and assessment (if at all)**?	**Policies, teaching and learning**
6. Are there any **programmes or training courses** on assessment for the staff of the school? (Have you taken any of them ?) Do you think they are **effective**? Why or why not?	**Professional development**
1. Can you tell me **how long** you have been teaching and what **modules** you are teaching **at the moment**?	**Role as lecturer**
2. Let's talk about assessment in one typical module you are teaching. • **How do you assess your students in this module**? • **Why** do you do that way? • **What** do you **want students to learn**? • Given what you want students to learn, **how** do your **assessment tasks support** this student learning? • **How successful** is your assessment in supporting this student learning?	**Assessment approach and practices**
3. Are there **opportunities for reflection, self-assessment and**	**Self-assessment**

peer assessment in your module? 4. How do you give **feedback** to your students? • Do students get a chance for **formative feedback** so that they can improve their work before they hand in? • How does your feedback **encourage students to learn** and be **successful**?	**and peer assessment** **Feedback**
5. What about the **final year dissertation**? How important is that for learning? Is it a good method of assessment?	**Final year dissertation**
6. How do your **assessment tasks** help prepare students for **learning in the longer term**, if at all?	**Assessment and lifelong learning**
7. Are there any **alternative approaches to assessment** that you would like to try? **Does anything stand on the way**?	**Alternative assessment**
8. Is there anything about student assessment policies, practices and your own assessment that we haven't covered that you would like to discuss?	**Further information**

Questions for the MU student focus groups

1. What have been your experiences of assessment (e.g. essays, exams, oral presentations….) in your degree course?
2. How has assessment helped you to learn?
3. Please describe examples of valuable approaches to assessment that you have experienced.
4. Have you had bad experiences of assessment which have made it difficult for you to learn? Could you describe examples?
5. If you could choose, how would you like to be assessed?
6. Is there anything about your assessment experience that we haven't covered that you would like to discuss?

Appendix 12 Interview questions in the HCMU case

Interview questions for lecturers

Questions	Prompts
1. Xin thầy/cô cho biết thầy cô dạy được bao lâu và hiện nay thầy cô đang dạy những môn gì? Môn nào thầy cô thường dạy nhất? Số lượng sinh viên trong lớp của môn đó là bao nhiêu?	**Personal background (**their names, what they teach and to which years)
2. Xin thầy/cô cho biết trong môn học đó thầy cô đánh giá sinh viên như thế nào? • Thầy cô có thể giải thích vì sao thầy cô sử dụng những hình thức đánh giá đó? • Xin thầy cô cho biết ý kiến của thầy cô về luận văn tốt nghiệp. Đó có phải là hình thức đánh giá tốt hay không và vì sao? • Nếu có điều kiện, thầy cô có muốn thay đổi phương pháp đánh giá của mình hay không? Thay đổi như thế nào? Nếu thay đổi thì có gặp trở ngại gì không? Những trở ngại đó là gì?	**Assessment approaches**
3. Xin thầy cô cho biết ý kiến của mình về những quy định về đánh giá của trường và khoa. Theo thầy cô, những quy định này có giúp ích trong việc giảng dạy của thầy cô và học tập của sinh viên hay không? Nếu có thì giúp ích như thế nào? Những quy định này có cần thay đổi gì không? Nếu có thì nên thay đổi như thế nào? **Tự đánh giá, sinh viên đánh giá lẫn nhau, nhân xét của giáo viên về bài làm của sinh viên: không áp dụng được ở Vietnam. Vì sao?**	**Department assessment policy**
5. Thầy cô có tham dự lớp tập huấn nào về đánh giá sinh viên hay không? Theo thầy cô, có cần phải mở những lớp bồi dưỡng về phương pháp đánh giá hay không? Tại sao có? tại sao không?	**Professional development on assessment**
6. Ngoài những vấn đề chúng ta vừa trao đổi, thầy cô có ý kiến gì thêm về vấn đề đánh giá sinh viên không?	**Further information**

Interview questions for faculty senior managers in Vietnamese

1. Xin thầy/cô cho biết sơ lược về tình hình đánh giá của khoa mình. Thông thường thì sinh viên được đánh giá như thế nào? Giáo viên có được tự đánh giá sinh viên theo cách riêng của mình hay không? Hay là phải tuân theo quy chế đánh giá của trường và khoa?
2. Xin thầy/cô cho biết ý kiến về quy chế đánh giá sinh viên của trường và khoa chúng ta: Quy chế này được áp dụng như thế nào? Theo thầy cô, Quy chế này có giúp ích trong việc giảng dạy của giáo viên và học tập của sinh viên hay không? Nếu có thì giúp ích như thế nào? Quy chế này có cần thay đổi, chỉnh sửa gì không? Nếu có thì nên thay đổi như thế nào?
3. Về luận văn tốt nghiệp của sinh viên: theo thầy cô, đó có phải là hình thức đánh giá tốt hay không? Vì sao?
4. Theo thầy cô, việc đánh giá sinh viên của khoa mình có cần thay đổi không/ Nếu có thì thay đổi như thế nào?
5. Xin thầy/cô cho biết thầy cô dạy được bao lâu và hiện nay thầy cô đang dạy những môn gì? Môn nào thầy cô thường dạy nhất? Số lượng sinh viên trong lớp của môn đó là bao nhiêu?
6. Xin thầy/cô cho biết trong môn học đó thầy cô đánh giá sinh viên như thế nào? Thầy cô có thể giải thích vì sao thầy cô sử dụng những hình thức đánh giá đó? • Xin thầy cô cho biết ý kiến của thầy cô về luận văn tốt nghiệp. Đó có phải là hình thức đánh giá tốt hay không và vì sao? • Nếu có điều kiện, thầy cô có muốn thay đổi phương pháp đánh giá của mình hay không? Thay đổi như thế nào? Nếu thay đổi thì có gặp trở ngại gì không? Những trở ngại đó là gì?
7. Tự đánh giá, sinh viên đánh giá lẫn nhau, nhân xét của giáo viên về bài làm của sinh viên: không áp dụng được ở Vietnam. Vì sao?
8. Thầy cô có tham dự lớp tập huấn nào về đánh giá sinh viên hay không? Theo thầy cô, có cần phải mở những lớp bồi dưỡng về phương pháp đánh giá hay không? Tại sao có? tại sao không?
9. Ngoài những vấn đề chúng ta vừa trao đổi, thầy cô có ý kiến gì thêm về vấn đề đánh giá sinh viên không?

Questions for the student focus groups in Vietnamese

1. Bạn hãy cho biết các phương pháp đánh giá nào được áp dụng trong các môn học từ năm nhất đến nay? Phương pháp nào được sử dụng nhiều nhất?

2. Các phương pháp đánh giá bạn vừa nêu giúp ích thế nào cho việc học của bạn?

3. Bạn hãy cho ví dụ các phương pháp đánh giá mà bạn thấy là tốt và giải thích vì sao.

4. Có phương pháp đánh giá nào mà bạn thấy là không tốt không? Bạn hãy giải thích tại sao?

5. Nếu bạn có thể được lựa chọn, bạn muốn được đánh giá như thế nào?

6. Còn vấn đề gì về đánh giá chúng ta chưa đề cập đến mà bạn muốn trao đổi không?

Appendix 13 Interview and focus group questions for the peer feedback intervention

(Some questions were adapted from Vu and Dall' Alba 2007).

Interview questions on peer feedback for the lecturer

1. Why did you want to introduce this peer feedback task?
2. Could you tell me about the process of implementing the peer feedback task in your course?
3. What do you expect the students to learn? How does the students' learning meet your expectations?
4. How accurate is the students' peer feedback? Do they understand the marking criteria clearly? Do they use the marking criteria effectively?
5. What are the students' opinions about doing these tasks?
6. Are there any difficulties when you have implemented these tasks? What are they? How have you solved them?
7. Will there be any changes when you implement the peer feedback tasks in the future?

Student focus group – peer-feedback intervention

1. Have you done any peer feedback task before?
2. What do you gain from this task?
3. How do you feel about your friend's feedback?
4. How do you feel about your feedback to your friend?
5. Are there any difficulties in the process of giving peer feedback?
6. Can you suggest some possible changes and adjustment for future implementation?

Appendix 14 Qualitative questionnaire on peer feedback – for students

(adapted from Vu and Dall’ Alba 2007).

1. Have you done peer feedback before? If yes, in which courses?

2. What do you like about this peer feedback task?

3. What don’t you like about this task?

4. Do you think that you assessed your peers fairly?

5. Do you think that you were assessed by your peers fairly?

6. Do you think that you assessed your peers accurately?

7. Do you think that you were assessed by your peers accurately?

8. Is your peer’s feedback useful?

9. Do you have any suggestions to improve this peer feedback task?

Appendix 15 Guidelines for students' peer feeback

(Revised from Dr. Green's module 'The Gothic Literature')

Effective feedback provides information that is **critical** (giving a realistic assessment of the quality and scope of material) and **constructive** (identifying real and potential strengths in order to suggest ways of further improving the material) in a manner that is **encouraging**.

Giving effective feedback is a highly-transferable skill that is useful not only in educational and professional contexts, but also in daily interactions with others. It is also a skill that can be used reflexively to improve the quality of your own work: the ability to make a critical and constructive assessment of material such as a piece of expository prose can help you identify the strengths and weaknesses of your own work, allowing you to view this not only as the author, but also from the perspective of an assessor/reader.

The following tips can help you to express your feedback in an effective manner:

- in identifying **positives** be sure to give the reason for your assessment (e.g., 'this is a particularly good aspect of your piece of writing because...')
- if an idea strikes you as particularly innovative, interesting or controversial, note this and suggest directions for further development (i.e. ways in which it can be extrapolated upon and/or places the author can look for evidence that supports or challenges her/his argument)
- in identifying places for improvement, emphasise the potential solution as well as the problem (e.g., 'this argument could perhaps make use of additional evidence or examples from the text', 'there are places where the discussion loses focus, but this could be corrected by reorganising the material to emphasise...')

- the conditional tense and interrogatives can help to give deference to the author (e.g., ‘Have you thought about...’, ‘you might find it helpful to consider...’); these discourse strategies not only reinforce the author’s self-esteem but also recognise the fact that as the reader/assessor you do not occupy a position of absolute knowledge
- but, although the use of mitigating strategies is useful in moderation, ensure that your feedback is clear and succinct so that you can maximise the space available for comment
- if at all possible (i.e. if you can do so without sounding artificial or awkward), aim to open and conclude your feedback with positive comments

What you are looking for:

In order to provide effective feedback, you will need to have a clear idea of which aspects of the material you are evaluating and on what basis. The following list gives an indication of areas that you should evaluate and on which you should comment in your feedback:

- **the argument:** is the argument clear and is it supported with sufficient evidence? can you identify what is being asserted and is this convincing?
- **originality and innovation:** does the discussion raise new points or consider the text in a new or unconventional context? does it challenge or develop existing scholarly opinion?
- **written expression:** is the style succinct and compelling? is it correct or are there errors with grammar, syntax or punctuation?