Executive Summary

At Northumbria University, the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Assessment for Learning (CETL) is a national centre for expertise in Assessment for Learning methods. Learning environments which support Assessment for Learning (AfL) methods can be described by the following six conditions (Northumbria University: 2008).

1. An emphasis on authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement.

2. Using high-stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly rather than as the main driver for learning.

3. Offering students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed.

4. Providing an environment that is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms e.g. tutor comments on assignments, student self-review logs.

5. Providing an environment that is rich in informal feedback e.g. peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work, which provides students with a continuous flow of feedback on 'how they are doing'.

6. Developing students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others.

Innovative assessment can be designed to produce a more meaningful activity for students so that the student can become engaged in the process of assessment and transfer the knowledge gained to a variety of circumstances, promoting deep approaches to learning (McDowell & Sambell: 1999; Shreeve, Baldwin & Farraday: 2004). In practically based subjects it is often common practice to use project work in assessments to provide a realistic context, and allow students to develop their own individual response to the assessment brief (Shreeve, Baldwin & Farraday: 2004).

Some studies have reported that students were found to value assessment tasks they perceive to be 'real' and authentic which they can take seriously, and undertake for more than just for the grades, but also because they will help them acquire relevant knowledge and skills that they believe mirror the skills needed in the workplace (James, McInnis & Devlin: 2002).

In Computing and Engineering undergraduate programmes, group projects are often used to provide an 'authentic' setting in which to role play the work of a project development team. Though generally often successful, the assessment of these modules is not without difficulties. Issues such as allocation of students to groups, defining student roles, group organisation and dynamics, group interaction and communication mechanisms need careful consideration, particularly when the class contains students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Teaching and learning methods that may be seen by the lecturer as innovative and effective for developing students' understanding may not always have the desired outcome due to learners' educational expectations and cultural differences. Some research has already shown that the operation and outcomes of peer response groups for example can be influenced by cultural factors

relating to individualism, collectivism, power distance, the concept of saving 'face' and communication styles (Nelson: 1997).

The management of culturally diverse classes has been a key issue for New Zealand universities due to their large numbers of international students and permanent resident students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The proportion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds studying at New Zealand and UK universities has increased in recent years reaching a peak around 2003. New Zealand's universities have built individual responses to inclusion which are beginning to succeed in achieving educational success with a culturally diverse student population (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Crengle: 2004; Paewai & Meyer: 2004). This project aimed to discover strategies for good practice in managing teaching, learning and assessment methods in culturally diverse classrooms from academic staff and learning advisors in both Northumbria University and universities in New Zealand.

As part of a project for CETL and the School of Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences at Northumbria University, a review was undertaken of the use of assessment for learning methods which involve students working together in groups. The project reviewed the ways in which different assessment for learning initiatives, particularly regarding group work and group assessment, have been adopted by universities in New Zealand.

Research from universities in New Zealand can provide further information and recommendations relating to the management of co-operative learning situations so that intercultural communication and assessment for learning opportunities can be optimised. This report also relates findings relating to the management of cultural diversity issues in other areas, such as extra-curricular study programmes.

Methodology
Various staff at all eight universities in New Zealand and at Northumbria University were contacted at the start of the project to ask whether they would volunteer to be interviewed. 45 volunteers from five New Zealand universities and Northumbria University comprised the sample group. Informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff, international student advisors and learning advisors at these universities. Academic staff were questioned about their use of group work, group assessment, feedback and assessment for learning practices. They were shown the six AfL conditions and asked to comment on areas of their teaching where these conditions were met. The academic staff were also asked about the amount of cultural diversity in their classes, and whether there were any issues or recommendations they could make about group work and group assessment in culturally diverse classes. International student advisors and learning advisors were asked about their roles in the university, the services they provide and their experiences with international students, particularly relating to working in groups. Throughout the interviews certain additional issues were raised or problems commented on which the interviewer could follow up further if desired. The interviews were anonymised, analysed and summarised, and the comments were grouped into related sections.

Key findings and recommendations
The key findings and recommendations below are derived from the literature review and the interview responses from the academic and learning advisory university staff.

Group work
Several researchers and respondents reported that it can be a challenge to ensure that group work projects are a positive learning experience for all students. Despite several students seeing the overall benefits of groupwork skills, most respondents found that their students would generally

prefer to work alone, preferring to have total control over their own marks and performance. As the abilities of students within a class are all different, there is a feeling that some group members could bring down marks of others. Several lecturers found that the main resistance to group work occurred when all students in the group were given a shared mark. Students were reported to often find formative groupwork more fun and seem to like to discuss things in 'safer' small groups than in front of the whole class. In this way group projects are not viewed as assessment opportunities but as forms of learning experience. It was recommended that, if group project outcomes of the task cannot be trusted to reflect individual learning, and group process measures also don't reflect learning, then academic staff should consider assessing learning individually.

It was believed by several respondents that there are some more practical and applied topics which can't be taught as effectively in traditional lecture situations as they can by practical groupwork taking a problem-solving approach. Some activities are 'naturally' group activities and should only ever really be done in teams. The group activities that are set for these students are therefore relatively authentic practices for the kind of employment the students wish to attain. It was recommended that academic staff consider the appropriateness of the group work activity for the students' programme's subject discipline. Several lecturers interviewed felt that their students were often most motivated by projects they perceived as having value and consequence. Several academic respondents recommended giving students sufficient time to get to know each other and learn about forming and working in groups before starting the group work task. This must be carefully considered as giving this extra time for familiarisation and team building can leave fewer weeks to complete the project work.

Group work and culture
The main conclusion that can be reached about the experiences of students working in multi-cultural groups is that it is not possible to generalise as to student and group behaviour based on culture. There appears to be no agreement from the literature on whether students find working with mixed-cultural groups a more positive or negative experience than working with mono-cultural groups. Ledwith et al (1998) and Ho et al (2004) for example found some domestic students were reluctant to work with international students and this made international students feel uncomfortable in those groups. However more than one lecturer interviewed during this project and in other studies (Holmes: 2003; Caspersz et al: 2004) reported experiences of mixed-cultural groups who had worked well together from the start of the group work experience.

Peer review
Peer review activities can help students learn how to revise and edit drafts of written work to see what works well and what could be improved (Nelson: 1997). Even if students are unwilling or unable to identify weaknesses in their own essays, they may perhaps be more willing to identify weaknesses in another student's essay and this process then allows them to reflect on and critique their own work. Individual students or student groups can evaluate other students' or groups' documents, presentations and demonstrations of their work. These activities can provide a good quantity of timely feedback from peers.

Teachers need to recognise that some students from traditional educational backgrounds and countries with a large power distance may see tutors as holding a position of power and being the source of knowledge, therefore the teacher's comments may be valued far more than feedback from other students (Nelson: 1997; Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Therefore the value of peer response tasks may not be appreciated by students from all cultures.

Students may need help in understanding the value of others' feedback via preparation sessions and emphasising the potential benefits. Telling students to 'criticise' each others work might be

perceived by students, particularly international students, as only providing negative comments which may make them feel less comfortable with the peer response task. No student likes to lose 'face' however this issue needs careful consideration in peer review activities, especially with international students who may be unfamiliar with this type of exercise. It was recommended that tutors could help the 'face saving' issue by asking the whole class to critique an example of work together, so that the criticism does not feel so personal. Alternatively the tutor could rephrase the peer review task so that students understand they are 'assisting' other students to get a better mark for their work.

Some academics are wary of using peer review to award marks, rather than for formative feedback, due to issues of whether students are capable of carrying out summative peer assessment professionally due to lack of maturity or insufficient training and preparation in how to do it. Some students were reported to feel uncomfortable with assessing other students' work and issues of potential bias by group members who are friends were also raised. It was recommended that tutors should consider whether the peer assessment will be useful and engaged in by the students as intended by the tutor. The tutor should also consider whether the students are mature enough and sufficiently prepared to summatively assess each other's work.

International and domestic student interactions
Creating and facilitating opportunities that promote intercultural mixing can be challenging. Such opportunities should recur throughout the students' time at university. It should not be assumed that a cultural mix of students on campus will lead to intercultural learning or positive cultural interactions (Wright & Lander: 2003). Carefully planned interventions by teachers and other university staff may be needed to encourage meaningful interactions between home students and international students and to break down barriers in the classroom and outside (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). It is recommended that tutors plan and facilitate activities in class that might increase levels of trust, acceptance, sharing and mutual support between students' and 'teach students how to provide help to each other' such as peer pairing and cooperative learning.

Culture and learning
Some interview respondents noted that cultural background can frame their students' mentality and had a great impact on their learning. More than one academic respondent noted that students from Asian cultures preferred the lecturers to teach them and didn't want to be 'taught' by fellow students via peer review, groupwork etc, as they had less trust in their fellow students' ability to help them learn. These methods do not fit with their expectation of 'proper learning'.

Some believe that students' learning styles can be affected by whether they prefer to work cooperatively or competitively (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004). Cooperative learning has been argued by some to be particularly effective with students from collectivist cultures (Ho, Holmes & Cooper: 2004; Tang: 1996). However Kumaradvadivelu (2003) posited that considering the communication behaviour of international students predominantly based on cultural factors will result in a lack of understanding of these learners and appropriate teaching methods for them. A group of students from collectivistic cultures will not necessarily form cohesive groups (Strauss: 2001). As was indicated earlier, while specific cultures may have general preferences toward collectivism, individuals within these specific cultures vary in the strength of that preference.

Prior experience issues
It is possible that some university teachers don't fully appreciate the many obstacles students can encounter when adapting to study in another culture and may mistakenly assume that international students enter their institutions with a full knowledge of the language requirements and learning expectations (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Some teachers believe it is the student's

responsibility to adapt to the language and learning culture created in the classroom and that it's the student's responsibility to engage with the social culture of the university (Bodycott & Walker: 2000). Mills (1997) and Strauss (2001) for example also found that some teachers had a tendency to interpret their experiences with international students using quite simplistic cultural stereotypes.

Language issues
Some researchers found that language was perceived to be the major deterrent to voluntary interaction and mixed culture group formation (e.g. Chamberlain & Hope: 2003). Cultural problems with communication may be alleviated by providing opportunities for students to speak out in non-threatening ways, such as group work and internet-based forum discussions, wikis etc. Language problems may be exacerbated for many students by unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning, and the cultural changes involved in moving to another country (Cownie & Addison: 1996; Smith et al: 1998). Some New Zealand universities have pre-degree English language courses, which were thought to be very good for preparing international students for their courses, however they may still not be sufficient. It was reported by most of the learning advisors interviewed in the New Zealand universities visited that the most common reason for international students coming to the student learning centres is to check that their English makes sense. It was recommended by learning advisors that academic staff ensure they review assignment briefs and check for things such as conciseness, appropriate cultural references, simple statements, assumptions which need to be made explicit, ensuring they include a clear set of expectations which aren't mixed in to a long statement alongside the task statements.

Extra-curricular programmes for international students
Working with peers has also been found to be effective outside of the classroom too, such as international buddy systems and other peer-pairing programmes, where a host student is paired up with a new international student. Westwood & Barker (1990) found that the international students who took part adjusted significantly better academically and socially than those students who didn't participate.

Several international student advisors interviewed for this project commented on the usefulness of cultural expectations training, such as the Excell programme. This type of programme is intended to make things culturally familiar for international students, provide them with practical strategies and prepare them for the reality of the educational experience, not just the social ideal.