Executive summary
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essay-type assessment

Executive Summary – 'E-learning tools for formative essay-type assessment'

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Formative assessment with assignments is of highest value in student learning. Assignments require students to construct and formulate their own thoughts and, depending on discipline, present these in the form of written essays, models, calculations or computer programs. The most important factor for student learning in the assessment of assignment tasks is providing high quality feedback available within a short period after task completion.

Educational theories around the importance of assignments and best practise are well established. Yet, investigations in New Zealand and world-wide show that these theories have failed to influence tertiary practice sufficiently to ensure the best possible outcomes for student learning.

This project conducted a comprehensive literature review and interviews with 90 lecturers at five New Zealand tertiary institutions as the basis for recommendations towards the use of e-learning tools in support of assignment marking.

Widely available e-learning and general purpose computer tools can be used effectively to support lecturers in dealing with assignments. Standard learning management systems provide tools for handling the assignment submission process, freeing up the lecturer's time for the core marking and feedback tasks. Students appreciate feedback that is typed and rather than handwritten. Constructing feedback in electronic format enables the lecturer to review feedback on individual, class and marker levels and opens up a variety of possibilities for quality monitoring and enhancements. Learning from assignments can be improved by increasing the communication among students and between students and lecturers, both leading up to assignment submission and in follow-up discussions. The standard communication tools within learning management systems provide effective support in this area.

The positive impact of using e-learning tools for management and marking of assignments is profound, a finding supported both in literature and interviews with

lecturers. The recommendations formulated in this project show what the individual lecturer can do to take advantage of e-learning tools and improve their assignment practice. The key step in doing so is to utilise electronic assignment submission via a learning management system, opening the path for both efficiency and quality gains.

The role of tertiary institutions must be to provide comprehensive support, to encourage exchange on best practise and to create an institutional environment that rewards achievements in teaching.