Ability of systems to support variety of grading schemes

Institutional regulations will determine who records the grade, how this is verified and in which system it is stored. Different courses and academic approaches may require more open grading schemes which are not accepted by the existing systems.

“One issue was the fact that marks had to be % rather than pass/fail/refer and this has been problematic.”

Course variations

Software constraints

The ways in which systems record and store marks can also cause issues for many institutions whose grading schemes do not match the way the software is configured. There are also concerns about the rounding of numeric marks and the possibility that double rounding of marks in different systems can give an inaccurate result. An audit trail of marks before and after moderation is also required.

“One issue was the fact that marks had to be % rather than pass/fail/refer and this has been problematic.”

“The platform really needs to be able to show more clearly what has ‘happened’ to a submission during the assessment cycle.”
**Priority 5**

**Student engagement with feedback**

Reflection is one of the most important components of the lifecycle as it is at this stage that real learning takes place. Nonetheless, there is a tendency for students to engage just with their marks, resulting in low levels of engagement with their feedback.

“Neglecting dialogue can lead to dissatisfaction with feedback. The transmission model of feedback ignores these factors and importantly the role of the student in learning from the feedback. Simply providing feedback does not ensure that students read it, understand it, or use it to promote learning.”

**Dialogue**

Opportunities for students to engage with staff around the feedback are often limited.
Student engagement
There are often gaps in the way students engage with the assessment process. Students need to develop the capacity to set learning goals and evaluate their own learning through understanding the process of making academic judgements. EMA can have a role to play in creating opportunities to engage students with the thinking behind online marking rubrics and in providing them with an overview of their learning pathway in order to help them understand how what they learn from one assignment can feed into future assignments and their overall longitudinal development.

Support activities
Students need to feel that they are being taken care of and can get the support they need at any stage of their journey. Supporting activities are key in defining relationships. At this stage support activities might include things like assignment tutorials, submission of drafts and related provision of feedback. Such activities need to be built into the overall assessment strategy design but also require consideration in relation to technical aspects of EMA.
Many of the stakeholders in the assessment and feedback process are risk averse because this is such a high-stakes process. Tutors are risk averse when setting the assignments for a course or module for a variety of reasons. They may feel that their own institution's quality assurance processes favour traditional methods of assessment. They are also afraid of setting challenging assignments that are unpopular with students or which may bring down the grade average for a cohort in case senior managers take a dim view of this.

Students are equally risk averse because they often prefer to stick with what they know and 'cram' for exams rather than spread their time more evenly across the year in a way which is better for promoting deep learning. Students paying high fees do not want to feel they are being treated as guinea pigs with regard to new forms of assessment. Students are often slow to see the value of activities such as peer review even though they are proving to be pedagogically effective.
**Encouraging new practices**

Encouraging the use of a broader range of assessment types is seen as an important means of enhancing learning and teaching practice by many institutions. This is often associated with the employability agenda and the fact that the current institutional emphasis on summative assessment and traditional forms such as essays and exams, differs greatly from the more formative ways in which professionals develop throughout their careers (including through extensive use of peer review).

**Cultural barriers**

In this context e-submission, can be seen as a double edged sword because academics may feel themselves to be constrained by the limited range of file types that lend themselves to online submission, feedback and marking. See also priority 6 risk aversion.

"Academic staff, understandably, don’t want their assessments to be driven entirely by what the technology can offer, but want the technology to be able to respond to the assessment requirements."
Technical issues

The more institutions become reliant on EMA systems the more serious technical outages become. There have been notable instances of major systems ‘falling over’ at peak periods. The challenge is complicated by the level of integration with other systems, particularly learning platforms (some institutions manage the submission process and academic integrity checking via the learning platform integration) and the way in which the institution’s own servers handle peaks of activity.

Student irritations

The technical system barriers have a high impact on the student experience, causing several irritation points. The speed of uploading assignments is often painfully slow, and may cause late submissions. Similarly, during peak periods the system may simply appear to crash and the student will not know whether or not their assignment has actually been submitted. The normal human reaction in these circumstances is to keep on resubmitting multiple times - hundreds of students doing this adds to the server load problems.
Ability to handle variety of typical UK marking and moderation flows

Models of marking

Systems seem too often to be predicated on an assumption that 1 student = 1 assignment = 1 mark. This model may usually be adequate for formative assessment but does not meet UK requirements for summative assessment processes. Systems would ideally offer a range of different workflows based on different roles e.g. first marker, second marker, moderator, external examiner etc.

Anonymity

A requirement for anonymity can cause various problems such as difficulties in identifying students who have not submitted and taking into account special needs/mitigating circumstances. The transfer of data between systems complicates matters as anonymity in one system may be compromised when data is transferred.
Marks vs. feedback

The existent EMA systems treat marks and feedback in the same way, rather than giving them separate permissions and workflows. This can act as an inhibitor to learning. It is widely believed by tutors that students often look simply at the final grade and ignore the feedback which could help them develop e.g. a student who got 80% might be delighted with their mark because it is on target for a first-class degree but they will never know why they lost 20% of the possible marks.

Institutional view

Many institutions would like to be able to release feedback to students and have them engage with that feedback before they get to see the final grade but this is often not possible in their existing EMA systems. The quality processes necessary to verify and validate final grades are time-consuming and hence, by the time both grades and feedback are ready to be released to students, the feedback is often too late to inform the next assignment so the student sees it as being of little use to them.
The discourse of resistance to online marking appears to be highly personalised e.g. some staff may cite eye-strain as an issue with online marking whereas others would cite the affordances of technology to adapt to their personal needs and make reading easier. For those who are prepared to undertake e-marking there is also a distinction between online or off-line marking.

“Staff resistance to online marking is much less than it was a few years ago though there are still pockets of dissent.”
In most institutions the student record system is the definitive source of information about student grades. Once a summative assignment is marked there are a range of quality assurance processes to be gone through before a final grade is confirmed - these might include second or third marking and moderation of the marks across a cohort to identify any anomalies and ensure that the marking process has been fair. The marking will be carried out in the assessment system and only the final mark will be passed back to the student record system.

Often marks cannot be automatically transferred to the student record system and have to be manually re-input (opening up possibilities for error). This is a burden on the staff (who may be administrative or academic) that have to do the manual input and it adds to the length of the overall process and hence the time before students get to see their grades.
Priority 10

**Ability to gain a longitudinal overview of student achievement**

EMA Lifecycle

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<th>Marking</th>
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<th>Recording grades</th>
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**Intelligent systems**

Current systems don’t support student learning needs. Currently, feedback against individual assignments is stored at a modular level and it is therefore difficult for students and tutors to have an overview that will enable longitudinal development. Many students also feel that having the feedback available in electronic form makes it more likely for them to revisit it at a later date than if it was on paper:

“It is clear that, for these students at least, having feedback electronically makes sense to them and fits in effectively with the way they manage their lives.”

**Analytical view**

Learning and assessment analytics can have an important role to play in this part of the process. Learning analytics is itself a relatively new field and assessment analytics is currently an underdeveloped part of this. EMA systems hold a wealth of data which, although needing to be used with great caution, could help personalise support for learning.