

the great nus *feedback* amnesty

NUS – Working to improve assessment feedback

By Aaron Porter, Vice President (Higher Education) | NUS

Welcome to the first in a new series of Education Quarterly newsletters from NUS. These newsletters will look at a specific issue and be based on contributions from individuals who have worked on the topic from both students' union and institutions. This first edition focuses on feedback on assessment and builds on the work of the NUS Feedback Amnesty.

It is clear that feedback on assessment is a fundamental part of the learning process. Not only does it enable students to develop and shape their learning but it can also foster greater levels of self esteem and motivation. However, research results, such as those coming from the National Student Survey (NSS), the Higher Education Academy's Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and NUS' own Student Experience Report have all shown that poor assessment feedback procedures are a huge worry for students and in some cases, having a negative impact on learning.

Complaints of ambiguity, lateness and negativity are commonplace in most university departments and the majority of students, 57% (NSS, 2008), are not satisfied with the standard of feedback they are receiving. We are also seeing a stark variation in satisfaction with many disabled and minority ethnic students feeling they have a more negative experience of assessment feedback compared to their peers. This is a grave concern. Students are clearly being let down, and some more than others.

NUS has been addressing this issue over the last year. Our members have been vital in this work helping us create our ten principles of good feedback practice and informing us of the real life experience that their members are facing. Our principles are as follows, NUS believes that feedback:

1. Should be for learning, not just of learning

Feedback should be primarily used as a learning tool and therefore positioned for learning rather than as a measure of learning.

2. Should be a continuous process

Rather than a one-off event after assessment, feedback should be part of continuous guided learning and an integral part of the learning experience.

3. Should be timely

Feedback should be provided in a timely manner, allowing students to apply it to future learning and assessments. This timeframe needs to be communicated to students.

4. Should relate to clear criteria

Objectives for assessment and grade criteria need to be clearly communicated to, and fully understood by, students. Subsequent feedback should be provided primarily in relation to this.

5. Should be constructive

If feedback is to be constructive it needs to be concise, focused and meaningful to feed-forward, highlighting what is going well and what can be improved.

6. Should be legible and clear

Feedback should be written in plain language so it can be easily understood by all students, enabling them to engage with it and support future learning.

7. Should be provided on exams

Exams make up a high proportion of assessment and students should receive feedback on how well they did and how they could improve for the next time.

8. Should include self-assessment and peer-to-peer feedback

Feedback from peers and self-assessment practices can play a powerful role in learning by encouraging reassessment of personal beliefs and interpretations.

9. Should be accessible to all students

Not all students are full-time, campus based and so universities should utilise different technologies to ensure all students have easy access to their feedback.

10. Should be flexible and suited to students' needs

Students learn in different ways and therefore feedback is not 'one size fits all'. Within reason students should be able to request feedback in various formats depending on their needs.



nus feedback amnesty

Rethinking feedback: an assessment for learning perspective

By Kay Sambell and Linda Graham | University of Northumbria

The provision of feedback to learners has long been recognised as a crucial aspect of effective learning in university education and is often regarded as the main means by which student learning will be improved. In the UK the issue of feedback has attracted considerable attention, not least in relation to its inclusion in the National Student Survey (NSS) in the form of 'feedback and support', but also becoming enshrined in the QAA codes of practice.

Traditional models of feedback

There are, however, different ways of looking at what is meant by the term 'feedback'. At one end of the spectrum, 'common-sense' views of feedback are widely held. From this viewpoint, feedback is viewed in a relatively straightforward manner: as something which is done by lecturers to students, or a type of service which academics offer. Students often use the word 'feedback' to mean just this. Glover and Brown (2006) have shown, for instance, that students' dominant perception of feedback consists of written comment on work being returned to them.

Yet, the more deeply we begin to think about feedback, the more this traditional transmission model of feedback reveals a number of limitations. Problems have been shown to arise due to academics' feedback messages being lost in translation, with students misunderstanding them, not being able to access the language in which guidance is couched, or failing to heed or act upon important advice (Higgins et al, 2001). Further challenges concern the timeliness of this type of feedback, which comes too late to enable students to improve their performance.

Assessment for Learning (AfL) models of feedback

As a result, 'newer', more complex theories about feedback have emerged over the last few years. Powerful arguments have been

put forward to reconceptualise feedback more broadly in efforts to promote the concept of assessment for learning (AfL). AfL aims to reframe assessment to maximise opportunities for learning (Black & William, 1998), rather than emphasising end-point judgment and the measurement or testing function of assessment (Broadfoot, 2007). The development of 'new perspectives' on guidance and feedback (Hounsell et al, 2005) have been key to AfL approaches.

There have been concerted attempts to identify key conditions for the provision of feedback-like effects in learning environments in an ongoing, meaningful and relevant way, rather than seeing it as something that happens at the end of learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; McDowell, Sambell et al, 2005). Approaches typically promote dialogic, interactive methods which seek to stimulate conversations, social learning, questioning, self-evaluation and group discussion about learning and assessment (Black, 2006).

From this viewpoint, students are typically seen as occupying a proactive rather than a reactive role in the feedback process (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006.) Here, for example, feedback is regarded as an essential part of the process of student self-regulation. AfL approaches often seek to empower students, so that they are not cast as 'disempowered apprentices whose role is to follow and reproduce' (Hyatt, 2005, p.351).

Our CETL at Northumbria has particular expertise in developing and researching ways in which these ideas can be put into practice (http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afil/). We specialise in researching students' views of these innovations and are more than happy to share our ideas with interested parties. If you would like to know more, please contact Kay Sambell (Director of AfL Enhancement) or Linda Graham (CETL AfL Student Development Officer) at; kay.sambell@northumbria.ac.uk.

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Students, the experts in their own learning

By Kate Wicklow, Academic Affairs Officer | Anglia Ruskin Students' Union

When I was a drama student at school our teachers were very hands on and we were given constant feedback and notes for improvement. From an early age I was taught how to utilise constructive criticism, as this is a vital skill to learn to progress in the arts. This skill proved extremely useful when it came to reading feedback on my written work at university, especially as the academic language used was sometimes quite confusing

I was fortunate that the drama department at Anglia Ruskin was quite small and so our lecturers were always available to have a chat about our work and how we could improve, especially if we didn't understand what they meant in their notes. This was certainly helpful to those students who had not been taught how to deal with feedback they receive while at school, but I know for students in other departments, it was often hard to make an appointment with their lecturer because the size of their course was too big.

When I became a Sabbatical Officer I knew that for most students feedback was an issue. Using results from the National Student Survey (NSS) I was able to determine that there are many issues associated with feedback that student face including promptness, helpfulness and legibility of staff's handwriting. I took these issues to the University and a working party was convened to address the problems.

A new staff training session was created to make feedback better for students but was poorly attended. When asked why staff hadn't attended there were three resounding responses; "why should I bother, students don't pick it up anyway," "I don't have enough time to mark students work, let alone to go on a workshop about marking work," and, "our department doesn't have a problem because our external examiners have not highlighted it."

The first two comments I was not surprised about at all, only about 50% of students at Anglia Ruskin pick up their work, and I could take a guess that it is because it is either too late or they don't really know what to do with the feedback once they had received it. The third comment however did make me think about feedback in a different way.

Looking at the results from the NSS, a picture is quite clearly painted that the majority of students in this country are unhappy about the feedback they receive. So how can external examiners, who are lecturers in other institutions, comment on the quality of the feedback our students receive when their students are unhappy too? It seems to me that the sector is currently looking at this problem in the wrong way. Although there are certainly differences between how students from different subject areas would like to receive feedback, I haven't heard a reason why separate institution should have to deal with this problem individually. For feedback to get better, institutions should be working together and learning from each other and hopefully asking students about the feedback they expect to receive.

I know that sometimes students have some pretty unrealistic expectations of their institutions, but they should be seen as the experts in their own learning and a balance must be struck. Feedback is crucial to students' academic development and they should be given the tools to use it from the very beginning.

I will shortly be leaving the higher education sector, but I hope that once I am gone, a national dialogue will start between institutions and by working closer together, the issues associated with feedback will soon be gone.



13:00
Lecturer feedback
meeting - 2B.



Better assessment feedback

A case study by Northumbria Students' Union

In the past, Northumbria students have been vocal about their dissatisfaction of assessment and feedback, particularly in the area of 'timeliness' where only 49% were satisfied. This discontent was further exemplified with two thirds of students voting to make this issue their priority campaign for the year in a Students' Union referendum.

This overwhelming majority vote, as well as clear NSS results, gave the union a clear mandate to strive for improvements in this area.

The campaign had four clear goals, all of which were fully or partially met. These involved having a statement of agreed standards for assessment and feedback across the institution, including a 21 day turn around for feedback, enshrined in the joint University-Students' Union 'Northumbria Student Learning Values' document. This was achieved with the support of the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching and Associate Deans from across the University's nine Schools, with a number of Schools taking the opportunity to revise extensively how feedback is relayed.

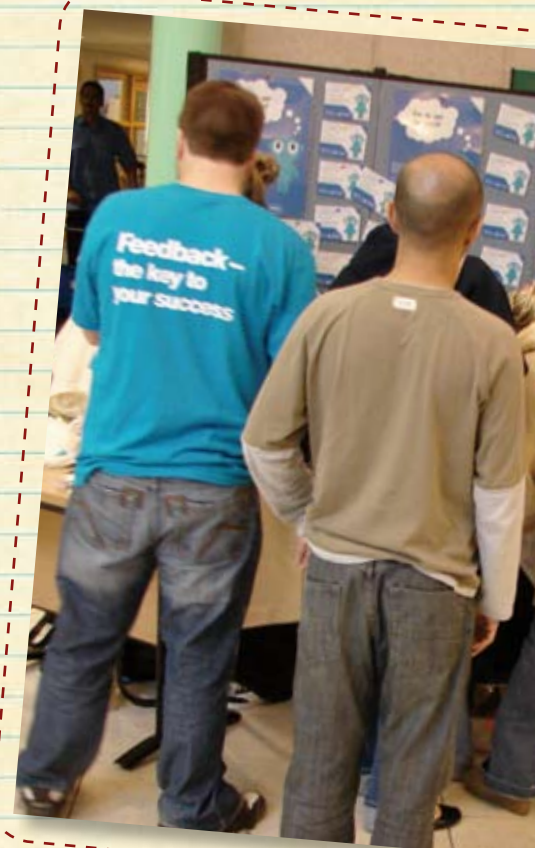
Students were involved in the campaign at every stage, with School Reps surveying their peers on their expectations on

assessment feedback and presenting the findings to School Learning and Teaching Committees, and driving the debate on what makes good feedback through student-led forums.

The campaign aimed to see a 5% improvement in the NSS score for Assessment and Feedback. The result was a staggering 9% rise, placing Northumbria in the top quartile in this category and with individual subject areas jumping by as much as 30%.

Lisa Burton, Vice President Academic Affairs, said,

"we are ecstatic about the results - they prove that our campaign delivered the goods where it matters, giving real improvements in student satisfaction and also practices in assessment feedback. This is no time for complacency, however, a number of divisions are yet to see these kinds of improvements, and we remain committed to the belief that only by sharing best practice between subjects and by introducing minimum standards across the board, can we reach a point where every Northumbria student is satisfied with their assessment feedback."



Is this all your work is worth?

A case study by Heriot-Watt University Students' Association

Heriot-Watt University Students' Association used the results of the NSS to highlight poor satisfaction with feedback among students. They ran a postcard campaign entitled, "Is this all your work is worth? Feedback Campaign," which looked to highlight best and worst practice in terms of feedback within the institution. They had an overwhelming response to the campaign with students asking that exam scripts be returned with feedback included. Students used stickers to request this when submitting their script. The University has now agreed to return exam scripts across the board and are now using the feedback policy composed by the Union. In addition, the campaign was recognised nationally and won the students' association an NUS Award for "Campaign of the Year".

Examples from Heriot Watt of poor feedback:

"All I get is a grade next to my matriculation number without any indication on how I'm doing"

"I don't tend to get any feedback during term time, so by the time it comes to an exam, I don't know how well I know the material"

"Getting an essay back where the only comment was 'use a bigger text size' nothing on how to improve my grade"

How do you use yours?

A case study from Sheffield Hallam Students' Union

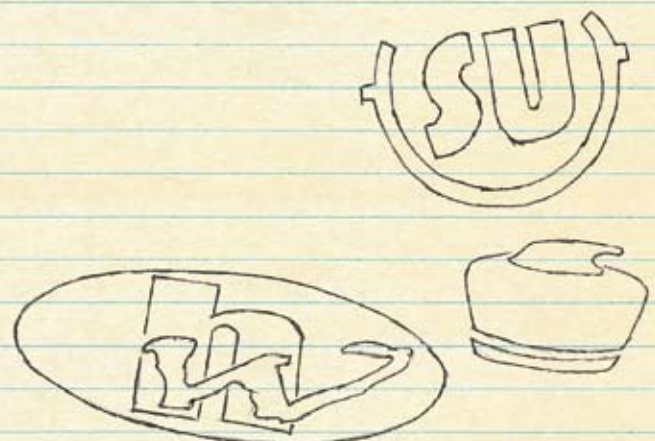
Sheffield Hallam Students' Union is currently working in partnership with their institution on the issue of feedback on assessment. The project entitled, 'How do you use yours?', focuses on exploring how students use their feedback to enhance their learning. The information gathered is used as a basis to campaign for improved provisions and ensures that the feedback provided to students enhances learning and increases student/staff dialogue.

A key element of this work is the involvement of student reps in the delivery of the campaign on campus. The reps spent two weeks talking to over 1600 students about the types of feedback they were receiving, their preferences and how they apply feedback to their learning.

The clear message from the students at Sheffield Hallam is that they know how to use their feedback and they want more of it, but that this needs to be in a timely fashion so they can effectively apply it to future learning. Dani Beckett, Academic Affairs Executive states "because the campaign took place in key areas around campus, it has not only brought together students from a range of different courses and but also started a dialogue on the issue between students and staff."

Dani believed that the campaign has been particularly successful as it has "empowered reps to make an impact on the issues that are clearly so important to students. A further bonus is that students have clearly welcomed this enhanced engagement and now want to get involved with more of our campaigns!"

The campaign is to continue through out 2009, please keep a look out on www.nusonline.co.uk for updates.



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Queen Mary: an institutional perspective

By Dr. Matthew Williamson, Education Adviser | Queen Mary, University of London

In 2006, it became apparent that, in common with most of the rest of the sector, the results in the National Student Survey (NSS) for assessment and feedback at Queen Mary, University of London, were the lowest scoring area in the survey. This coincided with a concern in a number of areas of the College that student assessment and feedback was not being given as much thought as teaching methods. A number of approaches were taken to try to address student concerns.

The first of these was a simple one – the College's senior teaching and learning committee was renamed as the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee. This name change served to highlight the growing importance of assessment and feedback methods. The second, more practical approach was that the Student Development Group was tasked to investigate and report on approaches to feedback and how this was given and received.

This group was made up of a mix of senior and junior academic staff, representatives from central services (primarily Information Services and Educational and Staff Development) and students. The group was keen to ensure that feedback was considered at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, so an undergraduate and a postgraduate student from each of the sectors of the College (Science and Engineering, Arts and Humanities, and Medicine and Dentistry) were included. Students and staff were asked by the group to investigate feedback mechanisms in their sectors, looking at given timescales, any departmental or faculty guidelines or policies on feedback and, where possible, gathering student views on the efficacy and usefulness of feedback on assessed work.

The report which was produced by the Student Development Group went, ultimately, to the College's Academic Board, which decided that a more formal College policy ought to be developed. The first draft of this, produced by Educational and Staff Development in conjunction with the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, was a formal Code of Practice with separate sections on assessment and feedback and with a guide to good practice included. After consultation around the College, and particularly following feedback from the Students' Union, this was separated into two documents – a Good Practice Guide for all staff and a formal College Code of Practice on Assessment and Feedback, which sets out basic College requirements for feedback including: a requirement for course design to include consideration of improving feedback, a requirement for departments to determine and publish timescales for giving feedback, an expectation that departments will seek more ways and opportunities to give students feedback on their progress, an expectation that feedback will also be used to help staff and departments be better informed of their students progress.

The full Code of Practice is available from:

www.esd.qmul.ac.uk/acprac/learnteach/Assessment_and_Feedback_Code_of_Practice.pdf

Copies of the Good Practice Guide can be obtained by contacting Matthew Williamson at QMUL (m.williamson@qmul.ac.uk)



Institutional approaches to feedback interventions

By Professor David Nicol | University of Strathclyde

The National Student Survey (NSS) has usefully raised the profile of feedback in higher education with the result that many institutions are devising interventions to improve feedback processes. However, these interventions run the risk of being quite limited in scope and effectiveness because the NSS inadvertently promotes a rather narrow conception of feedback.

The feedback statements in the NSS focus on the input message, on how teachers transmit written feedback information – whether it is timely, detailed and understandable to students. In all other areas of higher education, however, it is now accepted that for students to learn they must actively construct meaning from transmitted information; they must do something, analyse the message, ask questions about it, discuss it with others and connect it with their prior knowledge.

If feedback is to enhance learning, institutions need to adopt a more sophisticated conception of what feedback is and how it works. Feedback is essentially a dialogue not a one-way transmission process: it depends as much on what students do as on what the teacher does. Also, there is no ideal level of written feedback: instead the optimal level of detail and advice depends on learner needs. While too little feedback might leave some students in difficulty, too much feedback might hamper the long-term learning of other students by perpetuating their dependency on the teacher. Delivering written advice is therefore only a starting point if students are to learn from feedback. What is more important is the quality of students' interaction with the feedback message. This will determine feedback effectiveness and should inform the level of subsequent teacher input.

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004:2006) have taken the idea of student responsibility further by arguing that the goal of feedback in HE is to enable students to become self-regulated and lifelong learners. This requires not only active student interaction with teacher feedback but also opportunities for students to generate their own feedback through self-assessment and to develop skills in evaluating and providing feedback on the work of others through peer processes (Nicol, in press, Nicol, 2008a,b). Rich feedback dialogue from multiple sources and of many types is more effective and more representative of what happens in professional practice.

Viewing feedback as a dialogical process offers many benefits. Firstly, dialogue implies that both the teacher and student get feedback on the result of their actions. Hence it will be easier to address any misunderstandings deriving from poorly constructed written feedback comments. Secondly, if many sources of feedback are invoked it will be easier to adapt feedback to individual student's needs. Thirdly, viewing feedback as a shared process should lead to a more productive use of both staff and student time and help ensure that feedback is actually used to make future improvements.

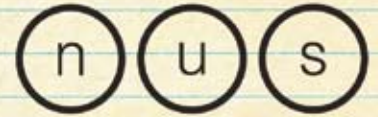
In conclusion, institutions wishing to improve feedback must base their interventions on conceptions of feedback that are consistent with what is known about good practice. Indeed, without a broader understanding than that implied by the NSS most interventions are likely to produce only short-term and limited learning benefits.

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national union of students

Assessment: a radical rethink

By Professor Brenda Smith, Senior Associate | Higher Education Academy (HEA)

This article emphasises the value of students taking more responsibility for their own learning. If students are to maximize their learning potential then we need to empower and motivate them to be more actively engaged in their learning. This may mean a radical re-think about how we approach assessment and feedback. To support students in developing the skills as life-long learners they should:

1. have a choice of assessment topics within certain parameters (to help with their motivation);
2. be given practice in setting criteria and marking against these criteria (better understanding and insight into what is required);
3. utilize the feedback we give (to enhance their learning);
4. engage in self and peer assessment and feedback (to develop the skills of self-reflection and critical analysis);
5. analyse and evaluate a selection of different standards of work in their discipline area and to be given an opportunity to benchmark themselves against the standards required (to enable them to know what an 'A' grade piece of work looks like and how it was achieved).

If students are to take feedback seriously we need to ensure that work is returned in a timely fashion and that students are told in advance when this is. Students want an 'e-bay' experience – they want the big picture of what to expect by when.

"If feedback is provided faster, there is more likelihood that students will read and respond to it. If students tell the tutor what they would like feedback on, they are more likely to pay attention to it and if students discuss feedback on their assignments, in class they are more likely to think about it and take it seriously. If students receive feedback on a draft of an assignment they are likely to use this feedback to improve the assignment."
(Gibbs, G 2006).

An issue that the National Student Survey (NSS) has highlighted is that students do not always recognise feedback unless it is written down. Yet, students receive feedback in many different ways and from different people. It is worth exploring this issue with student and highlighting their responsibility to learn from different people as well as themselves. To encourage self-reflection a feedback form could include the following questions:

1. Which aspects of this work do you think are good?
2. What specific aspects of your work would you like me to comment on?
3. What do you want to improve next time?
4. What learning have you applied from a previous piece of work that has been applied to this assignment?
5. What mark do you think this piece of work deserves?

Research evidence (Williams, J & Kane, D 2008) indicates the following issues can provide a positive learning experience for students. Does your institution:

- set realistic targets for achievable turnaround time on assessed work?
- make the schedule of feedback on assignments clear to students?
- timetable assignments evenly through the academic year?
- provide more timely feedback through activities such as assessment in class time?
- increase the number of staff to ensure better staff-student contact on feedback issues?
- provide feedback in alternative forms?
- ensure that assessed work provides a basis for future improvement?
- use one-to-one tutorials for feedback on assessed work?
- audit practice within an institution and encourage the spread of effective practice?

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