

# Quality feedback on assessment: apple for the teacher? How first year student perceptions of assessment feedback affect their engagement with study.

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*Feedback on assessment items can be described as being constructive and informative and can guide the writer towards improving. However, are students really satisfied with the feedback they are receiving on assessment items completed during their first year of tertiary study? The research presented here explores the quality of feedback and the impact this has on students' learning and progression to the next stage of their degree program. The study found that inappropriate methods of feedback can demoralise even the most highly achieving students, and that students can develop cynical views regarding assessment feedback, which can impact on their academic engagement and approaches to learning.*

## **Introduction**

While lecturers may believe their courses' content, design and delivery are its most important features, from a student's point of view, a course's assessment requirements take precedence over almost everything else. Universities invest significant resources in assessing their students, and a student's academic achievements are generally measured by their assessment results. Appropriate feedback on assessment items can enrich and improve a student's tertiary experience. However it can be difficult to gauge the efficacy of assessment feedback and its effect on students' engagement with their studies.

The research presented here explores the quality of assessment feedback and the impact this has on first year students' learning and progression to the next stage of their degree program. The study found that inappropriate methods of feedback can demoralise even the most highly achieving students, and that students can develop cynical views regarding assessment feedback. These views can impact on their academic engagement and approaches to learning. The research led to the creation of assessment feedback guidelines for assessors in the hope of improving the assessment feedback process and enabling first year students to receive feedback which is most likely to increase their engagement with their studies. In this paper we first present an overview of the literature on the first year experience, assessment and feedback on assessment, this is followed by a presentation of the study design, results, discussion and conclusion including suggested guidelines.

## ***First Year Experience***

The importance of a positive first year experience in tertiary education is well documented and is a widely acknowledged measure of the quality of students' overall tertiary experience (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; McKinnis & James, 1995). Furthermore it is a student's first semester or first year results which give the best predictor of how they are

likely to perform in the rest of their degree studies, rather than their school ranking with which they entered university (Murray-Harvey & Keeves, 1994). McKinnis and James (1995) contend that the importance of the social context of learning must be acknowledged in efforts to improve the first year experience and that three major influences shape a first year's experiences at university, only one of which directly relates to learning and teaching. According to McKinnis and James (1995), students' own characteristics and experiences shape their behaviour, outlook and expectations of higher education and therefore their levels of satisfaction. Secondly, the context in which they are studying, such as their accommodation and financial situation also affects their study habits. Finally, timetables and curriculum, the only matters over which universities have any degree of control, impact on their levels of satisfaction with their studies. Despite universities' lack of control over the majority of these influences, it is clear that if students are satisfied and therefore motivated in their first year of study, they should be more engaged with learning and do better academically, and this should have a positive flow on effect on the rest of their degree. A survey conducted by McKenzie, Gow and Schweitzer of first year students discovered that while "students who had previously attained high grades (resulting in high university entrance ranks) were more likely to attain high grades at university than students with poorer previous performance," overall in the first year transition period, having the will to succeed is just as important as having the skill to do so (2004, p. 108). During this period, feedback on their progress is vitally important to students, who can suffer from the removal of the close monitoring from teachers and parents they may have experienced at high school. The sudden loss of this support can lead to high levels of dissatisfaction at first year, and make transition that much more difficult (Pargetter et al., 1998). In this transition period, peer influence is also an important factor in creating positive attitudes to academic achievement (Pargetter et al., 1998). Overall then being satisfied, motivated and adaptable is as important as the way in which a student is taught and the results achieved at first year will reverberate throughout a student's degree.

### *Assessment*

Assessment is a crucial element of tertiary study, given the importance of the relationship between assessment and student learning. Ramsden (2003) claims that "the methods we use to assess students are one of the most critical of all influences on their learning" (p. 67). Indeed empirical research over the last three decades clearly identifies assessment as having a critical impact on the quality of student learning. Gibbs (1999) argues that assessment is "the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners" (p. 41). Ramsden (2003) suggests that from the students' perspective "assessment always defined the actual curriculum" (p. 182), directly influencing patterns of learning behaviour. In other words, students use assessment to make strategic decisions about the quality, quantity and timing of their learning engagement; decisions that often determine whether students take a surface or authentic approach to learning (Brown & Knight, 1994; Gibbs, 1999).

The relationship between assessment and learning can be an unhealthy one because assessment systems and practice constrain students' learning behaviour through highly individualised grading systems, the fragmentation of assessment tasks inhibits holistic approaches to assessment and the grading of assessment leads to a focus on marks achieved, rather than learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Black and Wiliam (1998) discuss the relationship between formative assessment and improved learning outcomes. In particular, they emphasise the need for interactive assessment processes that are supportive of student self-esteem, a classroom "culture of success" and assessment practices that encourage students to think about their own learning behaviour. Furthermore Longden (2006) suggests

that more frequent formative assessment during first year can reduce the risk of academic boredom, something he identifies as a first year problem. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) however, concentrate more on the assessment context and the “conditions under which assessment can support student learning” (p. 8). They suggest eleven desired ‘conditions’ and list them under two broad categories, firstly the influence of the design of assessment systems and assignments on how much students study, what they study and on the quality of their engagement and secondly, the influence of feedback on learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002, p. 9). The first four conditions relate to influences of assessment on volume, focus and quality of study. The remaining seven conditions focus on the influence of feedback on learning, that is whether feedback is provided often enough and in enough detail, focuses on students’ performance, on their learning and on actions under the students’ control, is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success, is appropriate in relation to students’ understanding of what they are supposed to be doing, and finally that feedback is received and attended to and is acted upon by the student (Gibbs & Simpson 2002, pp. 14-22).

### ***Feedback on assessment***

The importance of appropriate assessment feedback for all students is equally well established (Gibbs, 1999; Gibbs & Simpson, 2002; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Millar, 2005; Ramsden, 2003;). Receiving feedback on the first major piece of assessment is claimed to be one of the watershed experiences in the first years of higher education study (Krause et al., 2005, p. 22). Rust, O’Donovan and Price (2005) maintain that assessment should be a dynamic system with two corresponding feedback cycles (staff and students), each informing the other, ideally at every stage, with a common understanding being shaped and constantly evolving within a community of practice. However Juwah et al. (2004) adopt a slightly less idealistic approach, arguing that regardless of the best intentions of staff, assessment and feedback will be interpreted by students according to their own experience and expectations. Sadler (1998) identifies feedback as the crucial element of the assessment interaction between teacher and student, but notes that feedback is often a process of unequal communication. To help overcome this imbalance, Sadler (1998) recommends that feedback must only respond to specific and objective assessment criteria, should allow for students’ relative partial subject knowledge and must be expressed in “language already known and understood by the learner” (p. 82). Sadler also notes that when exposed to “defective patterns of formative assessment and... a wide variety of practices and teacher dispositions” (p. 77) students are often socialised into adopting strategic and surface approaches to course engagement and learning.

Through an analysis of the literature, three necessary conditions for effective feedback have been identified. First, students must have a clear understanding of the goals or required performance standards for a particular assessment item. Second, they must be able to determine the gap between their actual level of performance and the stated goal or standards. Thirdly, students must be able to engage in appropriate action to reduce the gap (Sadler 1998). Too often it has been reported that feedback merely provides information on how their performance compares to the standard without offering instruction that will help students close the gap. Furthermore, this is particularly ineffective if the student has not fully assimilated the learning goal in the first place (Sadler, 1998). Feedback miscommunication is further compounded by the way a feedback message is received by students. Students’ expectations about what learning should be like, perceptions of their own learning capacity, or beliefs about the risks associated with various response options all affect the ways students make sense of, and use, feedback information (Black & Wiliam, 1998). For feedback to be effective then, it must take into account student perceptions of the learning, assessment and feedback process. It is important therefore not only to improve the quality of feedback, but

also to provide students with a clear understanding of the learning and assessment context and to equip students with appropriate self-assessment and evaluation skills (Boud, 2000; Juwah et al., 2004; Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003).

Constructive alignment and active student engagement with assessment criteria and feedback processes have been identified as fundamental to effective feedback (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2005). Juwah et al. (2004) list and discuss seven principles of good feedback practice that emphasise self-assessment, dialogue, ownership, high quality information, positive motivation and reflective teaching. According to Juwah et al. (2004), good feedback practice: facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning, encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning, helps clarify what is good performance (goals, criteria, standards expected), provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance, delivers high quality information to students about their learning, encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem and provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching (p. 6). Additionally, adopting a student-centred approach to feedback, emphasising the need for student engagement with all elements of the assessment and feedback cycle, is beneficial to the students (Juwah et al., 2004).

Though Juwah et al. (2004) are student-focussed and Gibbs and Simpson (2002) are system-focussed, there is a broad consensus that effective feedback should provide high quality information to facilitate engagement and self-assessment in a positive motivational environment characterised by reflective teaching. Good practice will include deliberately structuring assessment to support student learning, ensuring that communication is explicit, positive, timely and constructive, and understanding that feedback shapes both learning and teaching. It is also important to realise, however, that some students may be more concerned with marks than engagement, may simply ignore feedback or see it as irrelevant due to poor timing (Gibbs & Simpson, 2002; Juwah et al., 2004). It has been reported by McCune (2004) that first-year students often do not understand feedback or fail to act on it or, in some cases, ignore it completely. McCunes' research suggests that feedback has little impact on first-year students' conceptual abilities or their essay writing skills mainly due to inexperience with how to engage with, or respond to it, an issue that is at the heart of first-year higher education learning.

### ***The study***

Given the impact of early assessment results on first year students (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) and the fact a student's first year results can provide a key indication of how they will do in the rest of their degree (Murray-Harvey & Keeves, 1994), a research project was designed to gauge what effect assessment feedback has on first year students' engagement with learning at our university – a regional university where the majority of the students come from low socio economic backgrounds, and are often first in family to attend a higher education institution (University of the Sunshine Coast, 2008). Additionally, it was important to see how the feedback students received at first year met conditions for appropriate assessment feedback such as those described by Gibbs and Simpson (2002). To explore the situation at the University of the Sunshine Coast, a study was designed to explore students' perceptions on feedback, within the bounds of:

*What effect does assessment feedback have on first year students' engagement with learning?*

In an endeavour to explore the research question, the study aimed:

- To explore the efficacy of existing assessment feedback.

- To develop assessment feedback guidelines for use by first year teachers.

The methodology followed in the study is applied research where the purpose is solve an immediate, practical problem, as well as contributing to the general knowledge in the field (Wiersma, 1995). Within this methodology, qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to collect data to describe the phenomena in words and numbers.

The research findings will enable coordinators of first year courses to adapt their assessment, marking and feedback to maximise its use to students and minimise the negative impact on students of an early fail grade. This will improve teaching and learning in first year and may have the potential to impact student retention.

The research project used an online survey. The survey consisted of 19 questions, requiring either a qualitative or quantitative response. Participants were recruited via an email and web link in compulsory courses at the case site university. The survey was open for three months. Although the survey was open to all students at the University of the Sunshine Coast, the questions related specifically to students' academic experiences during their first year of study. Three hundred and four valid responses where collected.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was designed to capture data in regard to students' reactions to receiving assessment feedback at first year. It was not deemed necessary to provide a formal definition of the term 'assessment' to participants as it is a common terminology and the participants were recruited from all degree programs at one university. Neither were specific types of assessment mentioned, as the effects of assessment feedback were the focus of the research project, rather than a statistical analysis of assessment types. The questionnaire consisted of six demographic questions, and 13 questions relating to the respondents' attitudes toward the feedback on their assessment tasks. The participants were asked to respond using a 5 point scale the helpfulness of the feedback (where 1 was 'very helpful', and 5 was 'very unhelpful'), and using a 4 point scale to respond questions relating to the clarity and timing of the feedback (where 1 was 'always', and 4 was 'rarely'), together with a space for any open-ended responses. The quantitative data was analysed using preliminary techniques such as counts and percentages. The qualitative responses were coded according to emerging themes. It was also important to ascertain whether the feedback students received helped them understand how to improve future submissions, and if they felt they could or would, approach teaching staff for further oral or written feedback.

### *Participants*

The study was conducted at the University of the Sunshine Coast, a young university with a student population of approximately 4000. In 2006, 55 % of the student population was mature-aged (21 years and over) with the average student age being 25. However, 45 % of the population are under 21. Seventy-five percent of the students are from the local region. The participants were recruited from the entire student body at the university, via an email and web link in compulsory courses at the university. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. However if they wished to be further involved in the project, participants' names and contact details were submitted, though this data was de-coupled from their responses to the questionnaire.

## Results

Responses were gathered from 304 participants across all faculties of the university, 25% were male, 75% female, with the largest age group (36.5%) being in the 18 to 21 year olds. Of these, 52.6% were in their first year of study at the University of the Sunshine Coast, 25% were in the second year of their degree, 17% in third year, and 5.6% enrolled in either an honours or postgraduate program. Non first year students were included in the survey to capture some aspects of reflection therefore giving a multi-level progression aspect to the perception of feedback on assessment.

**Attitudes towards failing an assessment item.** Responses indicated that 95% of the participants submitted all their assessment items in their first year courses; 80% indicated that they passed all of the assessment items that they submitted during their first year of study. However, in responses to the question *If you failed an assessment item in one of your first year courses, how would you describe your reaction?* 27.3 % indicated that they were ‘completely devastated’ to ‘it didn’t bother them’ (3.6%); results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students’ reactions to failing a first year assessment item (n=111)

		%
1. I was completely devastated	30	27.3
2. I was upset	52	46.85
3. It didn’t bother me	4	3.60
4. I wasn’t surprised	17	15.3
5. It made me wonder whether Uni was for me	8	7.21

**Attitudes towards the helpfulness of feedback on assessment.** Constructive feedback is considered to be a valuable learning strategy; therefore we were interested in students’ perceptions of the usefulness of this feedback; whether it was useful in helping them to see where they went wrong, and where they could do better in the future. In capturing students’ attitudes to this, two questions were asked: *Do you find the feedback you receive on assessment items you submit is useful in helping you see where you’ve gone wrong, or what you did correctly?* and *Do you find the feedback you receive on the assessment items you submit is helpful in terms of showing you how you could do better in future assessment items?* These questions received a 100% high response rate, and could be argued that the helpfulness of feedback is an important issue for students. As these questions are highly related, the responses are presented together in Figure 1.

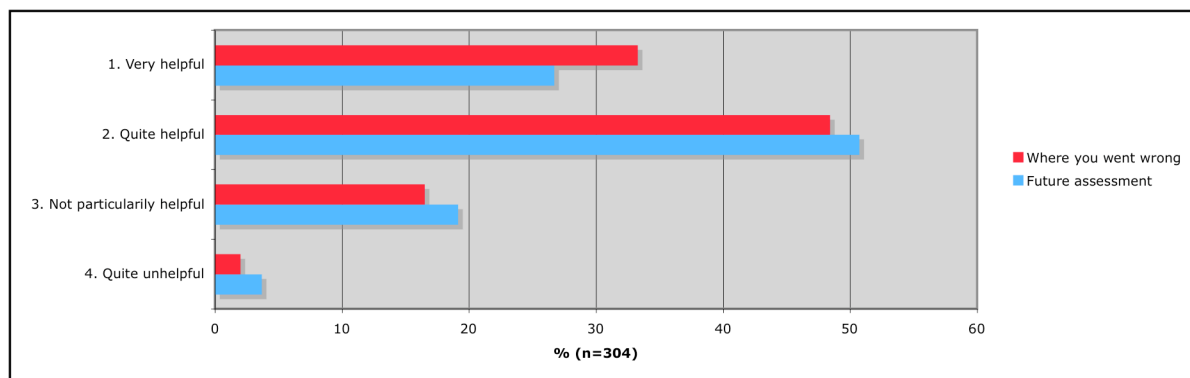


Figure 1. Helpfulness of feedback

The results indicate that the more useful the feedback, the more guidance it gives a student for future assessment items; unhelpful comments are of very little value. A number of the qualitative comments shed light on students' perceptions on the helpfulness of feedback:

*I am always open to learning and feedback teaches so much.  
No feedback other than a series of ticks, leaving no clue as to what marks were lost and for what.  
It is very helpful if it is not generic but tells you exactly where you went wrong and gives you a new direction to go and research.  
I always appreciate any comments written on my assignment – it gives me confidence to continue on.  
If we do not know where we went wrong, how can we correct it?*

It was interesting to discover that only 25% of the students surveyed often requested explanation of the feedback they were given; furthermore, 53% of the students stated that they did not feel comfortable requesting further information. An examination of the qualitative data related to this question gives insight into the students' perceptions, for example:

*I have been disappointed in the past and have felt very uncomfortable about questioning them.  
I don't want to waste their time.....is what I tell myself.  
I have had a few tutors who have been completely unapproachable and I hated asking them for assistance; in which cases I rarely ask for assistance.*

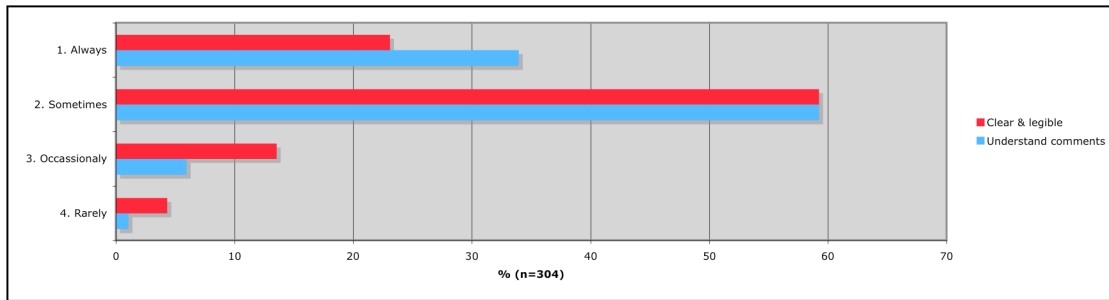
However, other participants had a different approach to not seeking further explanation of the feedback, for example:

*I don't see the point. They have already said what they want to in the feedback itself.  
I've passed and that's all that really matters. I would follow up a comment if I had failed or didn't agree with what they had said.*

Only one participant mentioned a power relationship between them and the marker, this is a serious consideration that should be explored further;

*One unit I didn't follow up as I disagreed with the comments very much but they were the only person running the course and I still had assessment papers to get marked – the power position there made it too uncomfortable to 'challenge' her position.*

**Perception of clarity of feedback on assessment.** Two factors that seem to influence students' perception as to the value of feedback are not only that the feedback is received in a timely manner, but also that the feedback needs to be clear and legible. In capturing students' opinions on this, two questions were asked: *Is the feedback you receive on your assessment items expressed clearly and legibly?* and *Do you understand the feedback and comments you receive on your assessment items?* However, the responses revealed that only 22.82% of students say the feedback on their work is “always expressed clearly and legibly”, only 34% “always understand” this feedback (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Clarity of feedback**

A common theme in the qualitative comments was the legibility of the feedback, with most comments relating to the poor writing, for example

*Some lecturers have got such messy writing I cannot read it.  
Their writing is terrible. Very messy. Can't understand 95% of what is written.  
Markers need to be careful about their writing as sometimes it can be hard to read  
which defeats the whole purpose of feedback – if the students can't read it or  
understand it then it serves no purpose.*

Regardless of the quality of the feedback, the availability of staff to further comment on the feedback, or the comments themselves, the timeliness of the feedback was an area that was explored during the study (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Students' perceptions to the timeliness of assessment item (n=304)**

Assessment item was marked and returned before next item submitted		%
1. Always	75	24.67
2. Sometimes	139	45.72
3. Occasionally	57	18.75
4. Rarely	28	9.21
5. Never	5	1.64

It is good to see that over 70% of the participants had their first year assignment tasks returned in a timely manner. However, the comments associated with this question do not portray such a positive light on the timeliness of feedback, and indicate that though 45.72% said that sometimes the assessment was marked and returned on time, having assessment items returned prior to the submission of the next, is very important. Sample comments are:

*By the time you get the marked assignment back the feedback can seem a bit irrelevant because you've had so much other work you have submitted.  
They are meant to be, they are usually promised.  
Sometimes they aren't and that really irritates me, as I don't know how to approach the second piece of assessment.*

## **Discussion**

The survey respondents appeared generally to be highly motivated students who tended to do well in their assessment items. In a sense this was disappointing as it meant we had failed to capture the students who are arguably most at risk in their first year of study. However despite our cohort being a highly motivated and high achieving group, there was still considerable dissatisfaction with assessment feedback. If these students are being affected negatively by



the quality of feedback they are receiving, the impact on less high achieving students must be significant, given that students with low self esteem are more likely to feel defeated and consider leaving a course after receiving feedback (Young, 2000).

One area of dissatisfaction for students was assessment items often being returned to them well after their next piece of assessment is due, making it impossible for them to incorporate what they have learnt from the markers' comments into their next assessment. Furthermore, not only is the feedback late, it is often illegible. Although the survey cohort may very well be more resilient than other less high achieving students, they are still being affected negatively by their assessment feedback.

Generally students displayed a pragmatic approach to the issue of assessment feedback. They appear fairly cynical about the role and working conditions of sessional staff which is worrying, given that it is these "most under-resourced and the least qualified staff members who are at the forefront of the first year experience" (Rhowden & Dowling, 2006). Students also appear resigned to the fact that a lot of their feedback is either illegible, or too late or poorly expressed to be of much use to them, suggesting there is a real risk of our students being socialised into adopting 'strategic and surface approaches' to course engagement and learning (Sadler, 1998). Many students are clearly not satisfied with the quality of feedback, neither in terms of seeing where they went wrong, nor in terms of recognising what they can do to improve their work in future. The qualitative comments suggest that students in general believe their work is marked subjectively, hastily and not in a timely fashion. The role of marking criteria is not fully understood either, partly because markers may not be referring adequately to it in their feedback comments, and partly because course coordinators and tutors may not be adequately explaining how marking criteria work. A common view among survey participants was that marking is invariably subjective.

### ***Conclusion***

The aim of this research project was to ascertain what effect assessment feedback has on first year students' engagement with learning. In an endeavour to explore the research question, the study aimed to explore the efficacy of existing assessment feedback and to develop assessment feedback guidelines for use by first year teachers. The study found that inappropriate assessment feedback at first year can demoralise and hinder even high achievers. There is the added concern that students can develop cynical views regarding assessment feedback and that these views can impact on their academic engagement and approaches to learning. However the research findings, together with previous work by Gibbs and Simpson (2002), and Ramsden (2003), have enabled the creation of very basic, but critical assessment feedback guidelines for use by first year teaching staff. The guidelines are:

- feedback is timely; feedback on one assessment is returned in time to add value to the next assessment submission;
- feedback is legible; feedback is electronic;
- feedback is constructive; feedback should include concrete ways to improve future submissions.

The alignment of markers' assessment practice and improvement in student learning outcomes has been discussed by Gibbs and Simpson (2002), however they qualify their claim, by noting that research in this area (including their own) remains relatively inconclusive and that the conditions they propose are simply "offered as a plausible set of guidelines" (p. 8). Therefore, the implementation of these guidelines and the mapping of their effects on first year students' learning and engagement will form the basis of future research projects.

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