



First Year in Higher Education Conference

AN APPLE FOR THE LEARNER: CELEBRATING THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

H O B A R T • T A S M A N I A



University of the
Sunshine Coast

Queensland, Australia

FIRST YEAR PERCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK: AN APPLE FOR THE TEACHER?

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Context

- The University of the Sunshine Coast is a small regional institution with a student population of 4000
- The majority of students are first in family to attend uni and from low socio-economic background
- Average age of students is 25, however 45% of students are under 21
- USC, like many universities, faces the challenge of first year retention

The research question

- What effect does assessment feedback have on first year students' engagement with learning?
- Outcomes:
 - an understanding of the efficacy of existing feedback
 - the creation of guidelines for first year student feedback

What did we already know?

- First year experience and results reverberate throughout a student's degree
- The will to succeed is as important as the ability to succeed
- Students can suffer from the lack of close monitoring they received at high school
- There are social elements over which universities have no control

And...

- Assessment methods are a critical influence on student learning
- Students often focus on marks, rather than the learning experience itself
- Receiving feedback during first year is a watershed moment
- Assessment criteria need to be easily understood.
- Assessment must enable students to bridge gap between performance and goals.

The research design

- Data were collected using an online survey
- Participants were recruited from entire student body, via email and course web links.
- Participation was voluntary, and anonymous
- Qualitative and quantitative data analysed to describe the phenomena in words and numbers
- Students gave personal details but these were decoupled from the data

The survey

- An online survey open to all students, regardless of their year of study
- 19 questions, requiring qualitative and quantitative responses
- 304 responses received, 52% of these from first years

Question themes

- Perception of failing
- Benefits of feedback
- Structure of feedback (clear, comprehensible & timely)
- Comfort in asking for more feedback
- Objectivity of marking

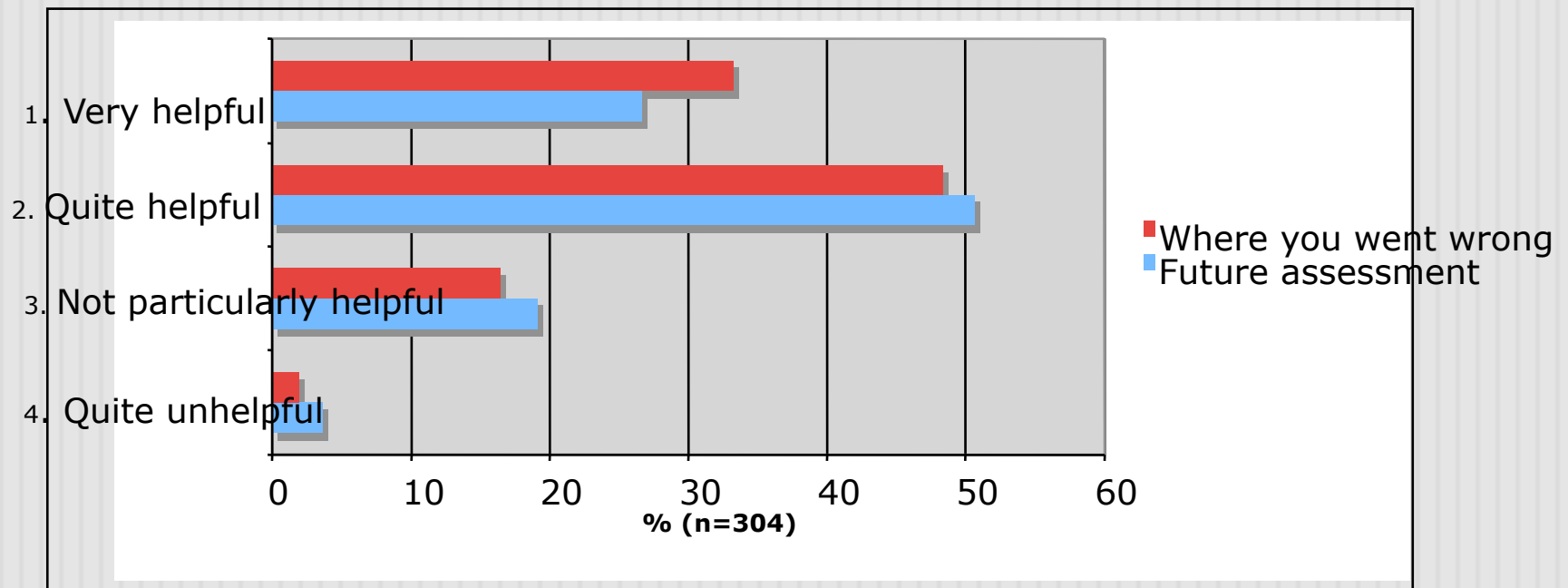
What our students told us

- How did you feel if you failed a first year assessment item?

N=111	%	N=11
1. I was completely devastated	27.3	
2. I was upset	46.8	
3. It didn't bother me	3.6	
4. I wasn't surprised	15.3	
5. It made me wonder if uni was for me	7.21	

ATTITUDES TOWARDS HELPFULNESS OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

In terms of helping you see where you've gone wrong and showing you how to do better in future assessment?



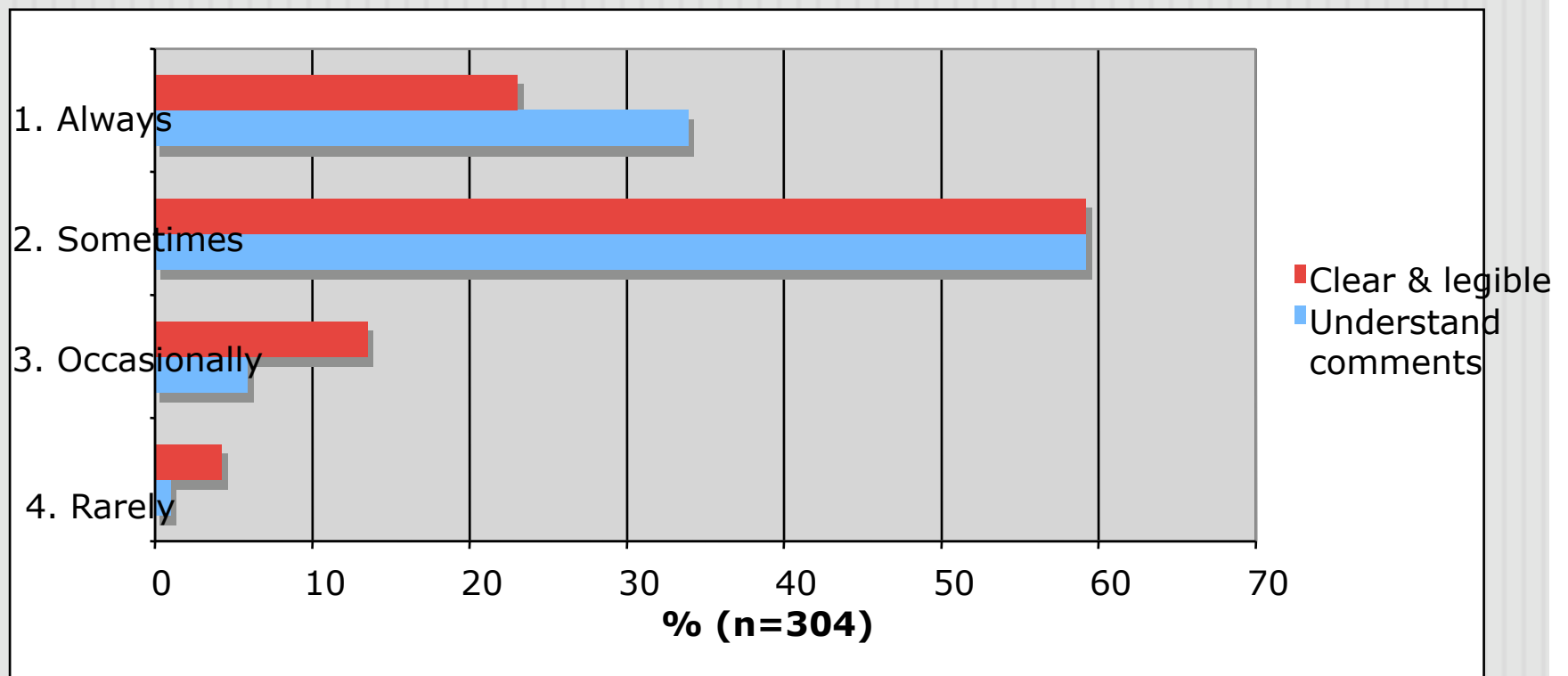
Comments on theme: helpfulness

- *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?*

FEEDBACK: CLEAR & COMPREHENSIBLE?

'Always legible' 22.8%

'Always understood' 34%



Comments on theme: clarity

- *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.*

ASKING FOR MORE FEEDBACK?

Yes, ask for it often, 25%

No, don't feel comfortable asking for it 53%

- I have been disappointed in the past and have felt very uncomfortable about questioning them.*
- 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.*
- I don't see the point. They have already said what they want to in the feedback itself.*
- 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.*

Timeliness of feedback?

Assessment marked and returned before next submission	%	N=304
1. Always	24.6	
2. Sometimes	45.7	
3. Occasionally	18.7	
4. Rarely	9.21	
5. Never	1.64	

Comments on theme: timeliness

- *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 assignment.*

Findings

- Considerable dissatisfaction with assessment feedback, especially legibility & timeliness
- Many believe work is marked hastily, and subjectively
- Not fully aware of the role of marking criteria
- Sample appears to be a highly motivated group of students
- Well-versed with working conditions of sessionals

Conclusions

Feedback

- should be timely,
- received before the next item is due
- should be constructive
- Should include concrete ways of improving student submissions
- be legible,
- Be given electronically

Questions?

thank you from Anna and Kathy
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