

Assessment and feedback in the first year: the professional and the personal

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Abstract

As educationalists have long understood, assessment and feedback are vital components of student learning. In recent years this understanding has been more widely acknowledged by the inclusion of assessment items in national surveys of 'the student experience', with the consequence that institutions – corporately – have found it necessary to make enhancements to assessment methodology.

However, it is in the interaction between academic staff and students that assessment approaches have practical effect, and practical consequences. This is of particular importance in first-year studies since students will be making transitions (varied, according to their background circumstances) into a new regimen of learning with its associated – and, for some, unfamiliar – expectations.

Whilst acknowledging there are undoubtedly good practices in assessment across higher education systems, this paper offers to those involved in assessment a number of signals towards the enhancement of practice. Some potential enhancements are within the compass of individuals, but a broader perspective points to curriculum design as being of fundamental importance if the effectiveness of assessment is to be optimised.

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Institutional goals and the assessment of student achievement

Higher education is increasingly finding itself subject to comparisons based on indicators of one kind or another, as is shown in both 'league tables' (rankings) and various publishers' guides to choosing a course and an institution. Understandably, institutional managers find themselves under pressure to show improvements on key indicators. As is the case with some students, 'getting the grade' becomes the focus of attention. This can lead to an institution-level version of seeking to achieve 'performance goals' such as high scores in respect of student retention or national surveys of student opinion. Whilst it is true that attention to performance goals can lead to good outcomes (Pintrich, 2000), attention to 'learning goals' (which, at institutional level, can be interpreted in terms of 'getting the learning culture right') may produce a more soundly-grounded success. In other words, if the learning culture is 'got right', then the performance indicators will follow. Or, stated in a negative form (and metaphorically), chasing a will-o-the-wisp can lead the unwary into a bog.

In a keynote speech, Tinto (2009) implicitly took a position in respect of the performance goals versus learning goals dichotomy when he reiterated his longstanding view that

Education, not mere retention, is the proper goal of institutional action.
Retention and graduation are its byproducts. (Tinto, 2009, p.5)

In the same speech, Tinto commented that four conditions stood out as supportive of student success – expectations, support, feedback and involvement (p.3). Ramsden (2003, p.99) had earlier noted:

Of all the facets of good teaching that are important to [students], feedback on assessed work is perhaps the most commonly mentioned.

Yet assessment, for all its importance to student success, does not feature prominently amongst the reasons for student withdrawal from study programmes. For example, it seems to have played only a minor part in the decision by nearly two thousand Bachelor's Degree students, enrolled in 2004 in 14 Australian universities, to discontinue their study programme (Long et al, 2006, p.46ff). From the point of view of withdrawal (but not academic failure, of course), it is perhaps a second or third order influence since it lacks the driving power of a realisation that the choice of programme was wrong, or of various personal crises.

This paper focuses on issues relating to assessment and feedback in respect of first-year students' experience, but expectations, support and involvement – though not treated as extensively as they warrant – appear from time to time in connection with the argument being advanced.

Assessment: the first-year context

Assessment has two main functions – to support learning and to certify achievements¹. In the first year, the emphasis has to be on the former: for most students, certification can come

¹ There are also diagnostic and quality assurance purposes, but these will not be considered here.

later². Students need to understand these functions but, at the commencement of their programmes,

The common experience seems to be that students are being swamped by a tsunami of competing information and many ... important messages are being missed.
(Lodge, 2010, p.104)

Information overload is a problem. Institutions do not always give adequate attention to the perspective of the student. The assessment regulations for one UK university, which are supposed to serve the needs of both students and staff, run to 47 pages and contain 22543 words. Not included in this document are the assessment requirements for individual modules. Students are asked to read the assessment regulations carefully and to retain the document for future reference. Whilst the document is – for various understandable reasons – intended to be comprehensive, its practical utility as regards students is very questionable, especially since it constitutes only a fraction of the information provided to them on enrolment. (By way of contrast, the US Constitution runs to 4584 words, not counting amendments.)

Students entering higher education have to deal with some or all of a number of potential stressors:

- Understanding ‘how higher education works’, which is likely to be rather different from previous educational experiences
- Acclimatising to the culture and expectations of higher education
- Understanding the language of higher education
- Psycho-social stress
- Study in a second language
- Balancing commitment to higher education against other commitments

Assessment interacts with these to augment the potential stress.

From acquiescence towards autonomy

A range of writers on student development (Kohlberg, 1964; Perry, 1998/1970; King and Kitchener, 1996; Kuhn and Weinstock, 2002; Baxter Magolda, 2009) have, in various ways, drawn attention to a key transformation that is widely expected of students in higher education³ – a move from dependence on authority (or acquiescence) towards personal autonomy. Whereas the ‘acquiescence’ end of the trajectory involves a reliance on external authority, the ‘autonomy’ end encompasses the student’s ability to study independently, to analyse evidence critically, to self-assess, to self-regulate, and to take action independently save where the sensible move is to seek guidance from someone with greater experience.

Brownlee et al (2009) identify three perspectives on knowledge: ‘objectivism’, in which knowledge is absolute and transferable; ‘subjectivism’, in which it is based on personal experience; and ‘evaluativism’, in which knowledge emerges from an evidence-based critique of multiple perspectives. The first two of their ‘isms’ would seem to lie towards

² Some students will want to exit at the end of their first year, with something tangible to show for their efforts.

³ Strictly, most rather than all students. Some will enter higher education with plenty of life-experience in which they have already had to exercise autonomy.

acquiescence, whereas the third implies something of an autonomous stance. One can detect hints of a parallel with the hierarchy of expertise in using evidence in essay-writing in first-year psychology (McCune 2004, p.262). From the point of view of the curriculum developer, a key issue is how to facilitate the development of students' capabilities regarding critical evaluation of evidence.

For perhaps many students, the development of the capacity to work independently (in the fullest sense) takes time. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), researching the experience of students in an inner-city university with a highly diverse student body, noted:

The majority of the students in the 1st year felt that they had been expected to be 'independent' too early in their studies and that they had been left to sink or swim. The notion of the 'independent learner' as the apex of learner development underpins much recent pedagogical and government policy discourse, though it is, we suggest, based on a specific white, Western, masculinised model that is inappropriate to, and excludes, the majority of the students in this study ... (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p.610.)

Leckey and Cook (1999) found that science students at a university in Northern Ireland retained the study habits of school well into the first year of their university course. Staff expectations had been that the students would have worked more independently. Along similar lines, but in this case referring to History, Booth (2005, Section 3) observed:

For a significant number, the purpose of studying history is to get to the 'truth' through collecting the 'facts', and deploying these in an examination. This creates problems in year one university curricula, which routinely demand more complex engagement with history as a contested discourse.

[...]

Whilst history students at both school and university see the teacher as their most important resource, new undergraduates often see the tutor as the 'expert' who can (and perhaps should) give them 'the information'. By contrast university history teachers emphasise the need for student autonomy and independent judgement.

Pokorny and Pokorny (2005) noted that students will not necessarily quickly become independent learners without help even though, as Fazey and Fazey (2001) found when first-year undergraduates enrolled at the University of Wales, Bangor, they may exhibit a positive inclination towards autonomy⁴.

For many students, the intellectual and emotional journey towards autonomy may take quite a bit of time and require appropriate support.

A small dark cloud over the field of post-compulsory vocational (loosely 'TAFE-like') education in the UK has the potential to cast its shadow over higher education. Torrance (2007) shows how transparent 'tightness' of specification regarding assessment can lead through 'criteria compliance' not towards autonomy but towards narrowness of perspective and an enhanced dependency on the teacher.

⁴ The students were, however, cautious about their ability to meet the challenges of higher education. Fazey and Fazey express a concern that over-specification of curricula could inhibit the development of autonomy in students.

Evidence from substantial surveys

A slew of reports published by the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] in the UK have indicated that, quite often, feedback has not been timely and has not given sufficient indication to students about how to improve⁵. Although these reports are now somewhat dated, and the National Student Survey [NSS] has encouraged institutions to pay more attention to feedback (see below), analyses of NSS data at institutional level show considerable variation between subject areas as regards student perceptions of feedback. The QAA's strictures seem still to apply – if, possibly, not as broadly as once was the case.

Items relating to assessment and feedback (particularly the latter) have consistently attracted the weakest positivity in student response to the National Student Survey in the UK. This has caused institutions to make moves to improve matters: however, the improvement as judged from NSS responses has been only marginal. In Australia, responses to the Appropriate Assessment Scale^[1] of the Course Experience Questionnaire have declined over time from an initial level of around 60 per cent positivity to below 50 per cent (GCA, 2010, Table F19). Contrastingly, the two feedback-related items in the Good Teaching scale have shown a stronger upward trend to around 50 per cent positivity. These instruments survey students towards the end of, or just after, their undergraduate programmes, respectively – i.e. at some remove from the first-year experience.

First-year experience surveys across multiple institutions have been a longstanding feature of higher education in the US (the 'Your First College Year' [YFCY] survey, Ruiz et al, 2010) and Australia (James et al, 2010 and preceding reports), but only one has taken place in the UK (Yorke and Longden, 2007; 2008). Unfortunately for an overview, the surveys have asked different questions in the area of assessment. The YFCY survey of 2009 asked only about the extent to which students *sought* feedback on their work: 47.8 per cent of females, compared to 38.6 per cent of males claimed 'frequently' to have sought it (Ruiz et al, 2010, pp.6-7). No questions were asked about the actual provision of feedback on submitted work. In the Australian surveys 29 per cent of respondents in both 2004 and 2009 indicated that they regularly sought the advice and assistance of the teaching staff. Close to half of the Australian respondents in the most recent surveys indicated that staff were usually available to discuss their work, though the provision of helpful feedback was acknowledged by only about one third of the total respondents. The proportion of respondents saying that most academic staff took an interest in their progress dipped slightly from 30 per cent in 2004 to 26 per cent in 2009, though the proportion saying that staff made a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having with their work was in each case roughly 20 percentage points higher. The report on the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement [AUSSE] administered in 2008 noted that, whereas 38.6 per cent of first-year respondents indicated that they had often or very often received feedback on their performance, data from staff indicated that staff perceptions regarding the provision of feedback ran at roughly double this level (80.4 per cent): see ACER (2009, Figure 9). A similar comparison was not made in the report of the 2009 administration.

⁵ See for example QAA (2008). Earlier reports on individual institutions have been a little more forthright.

^[1] The scope of the Appropriate Assessment scale is limited to memorisation of factual material, which is palpably insufficient in relation to the broad aims of higher education.

The study by Yorke and Longden asked students to respond to three items relating to feedback. Figure 1, which is based on roughly 7,000 responses, shows some differences between nine subject areas across the 25 institutions involved⁶.

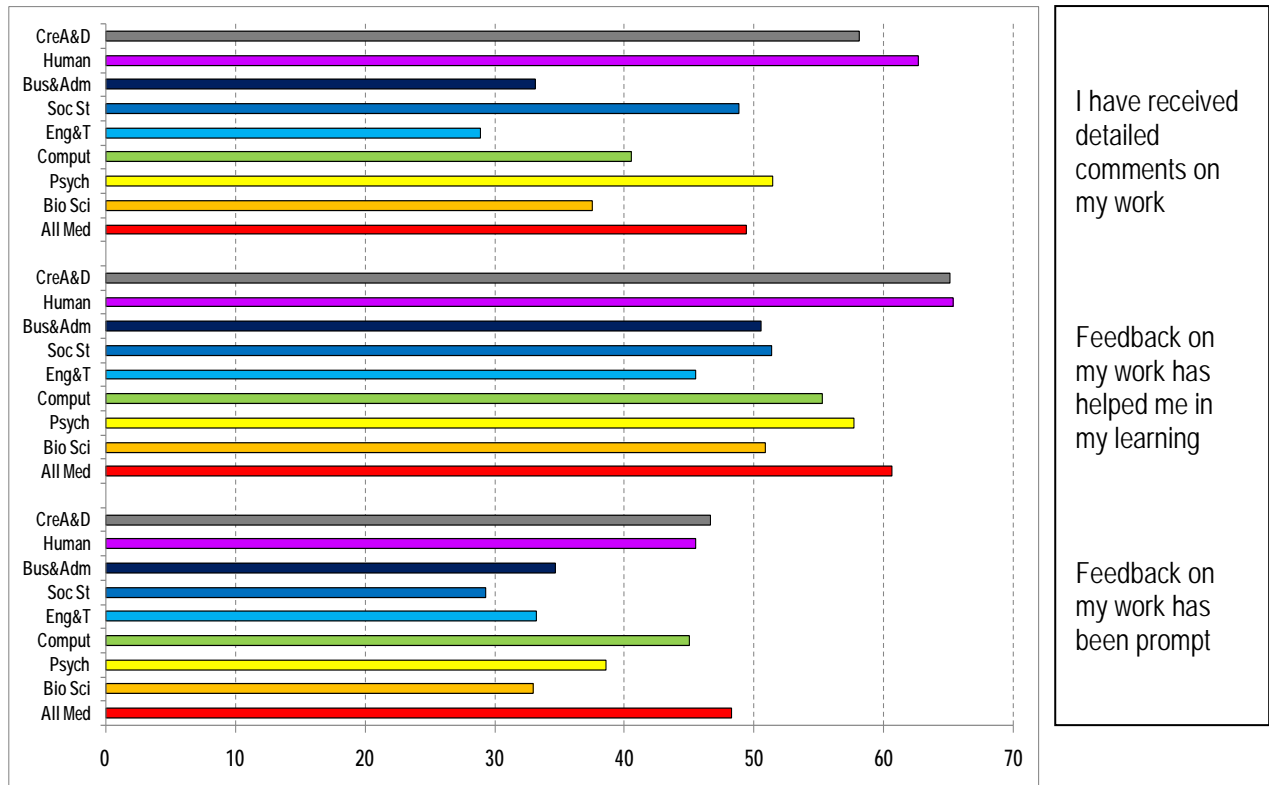
It is noticeable that three broad subject areas (subjects allied to Medicine, Humanities, and Creative Arts and Design) show up strongly across the three survey items relating to feedback. It is possible (though qualitative investigation would be needed to check it) that this is connected with the teaching approaches used. The Humanities tend to involve quite a lot of seminar work, Arts and Design involve informal contact between staff and students as the latter undertake practical work, and in subjects allied to Medicine there is considerable potential for feedback during practical activities in wards and the like. There is a difference between the Australian respondents and those from the UK as regards the helpfulness of feedback for learning: whereas 33 per cent of Australian students indicated that feedback had been helpful, the percentage from the UK was 57⁷.

⁶ The sampling design is provided in Yorke and Longden (2007).

⁷ Care has to be taken with this comparison, since differences in both academic culture and methodology may have played a part.

Figure 1 Comparison, across nine broad subject areas, of percentage agreement with three items relating to feedback.

CreA&D = Creative Arts and Design; Human = Humanities; Bus&Adm = Business and Administration; Soc St = Social Studies; Eng&T = Engineering and Technology; Comput = Computer Science; Psych = Psychology; Bio Sci = Biological Sciences; All Med = subjects allied to Medicine.



Issues in effectiveness of formative assessment and feedback

Formative assessment and feedback are treated as synonymous by some. However, formative assessment embodies a summative element, as Taras (2005) in particular has pointed out. Taras (2010) neatly summed up the relationship between formative assessment and feedback in an equation:

Summative assessment + feedback = formative assessment.

It may be that – as Taras (2005) acknowledges – the summative assessment component is taken for granted (and hence left unmentioned), since feedback can signal implicitly as well as explicitly how well the student's work has matched up to expected standards. She is clear that the equation on its own is insufficient since students have to engage with the feedback (which is not restricted to coming from academic staff) if they are to advance their learning⁸.

⁸ Nicol (2010) and others take a similar line regarding the need for students to be active in learning from feedback.

Nicol (2009b, p.5) offered twelve principles of good formative assessment and feedback, which are slightly amended here:

1. Clarify goals, criteria, standards
2. Encourage time and effort on challenging tasks
3. Give good feedback that helps self-correction
4. Provide opportunities to act on feedback
5. Ensure summative assessment assists learning
6. Encourage dialogue about learning
7. Facilitate self-assessment and reflection
8. Encourage motivation and self-esteem
9. Give students choice regarding assessment
10. Involve students in policy and practice re assessment
11. Support development of learning groupings
12. Inform teachers about their teaching

This paper picks up on the first eight principles, though the second and eighth principles are more implicit than explicit.

There are plenty of studies in the literature (albeit of varying magnitude and consistency) which illustrate factors that can militate against success in providing feedback. These factors include

- Disjunctions between expectations and reality
- The intelligibility of comments and marks
- Student reactions to feedback
- Staff approaches to assessment
- Issues relating to 'the personal'
- The need of many students to balance competing demands on their time
- Student-teacher relationships in respect of assessment

The factors, most of which have been subdivided in what follows, are in practice quite strongly inter-related. The linear presentation of a paper militates against the multidimensionality of formative assessment and feedback, so the reader is invited to take a holistic, rather than a serialist's, approach to the argument as it develops.

A caveat. A relatively short paper cannot do justice to the amount of research evidence now available, hence brief exemplifications of some of the factors are given below. In presenting these exemplifications, no claim can be made as regards representativeness of the issues and examples.

Expectations and reality

Expectations and experience

A survey, by Brinkworth et al (2009), of students on humanities and science programmes in one university followed their expectations at orientation through to their actual experience of the first year (during and after it), and set the responses against what staff said they did. Of relevance to this paper are four items which here are expressed in terms of students'

expectation at orientation (the wording was changed appropriately for students' actual experience and for staff provision):

- Having 'ready' access to my lecturers and tutors outside of face-to-face teaching will be important to my success.
- Feedback on my submitted work will be important to my learning.
- Feedback on DRAFTS of work will be important to my learning.
- What is the acceptable time for having your essays/work examined and returned to you?

Responses to the first three items are shown in Table 1. However, some caution is needed in regard to interpreting the data since – as is evident from the account provided by Brinkworth et al – there are some implausibilities in the figures. Despite the caveat, there are similarities with the data gained from the 2008 AUSSE administration (noted above) regarding student and staff perceptions regarding feedback on submitted work.

Table 1 Expectations and experiences of students regarding feedback set against provision by academic staff (source: Brinkworth et al, 2009).
Colour code: black = Humanities; red = Science.

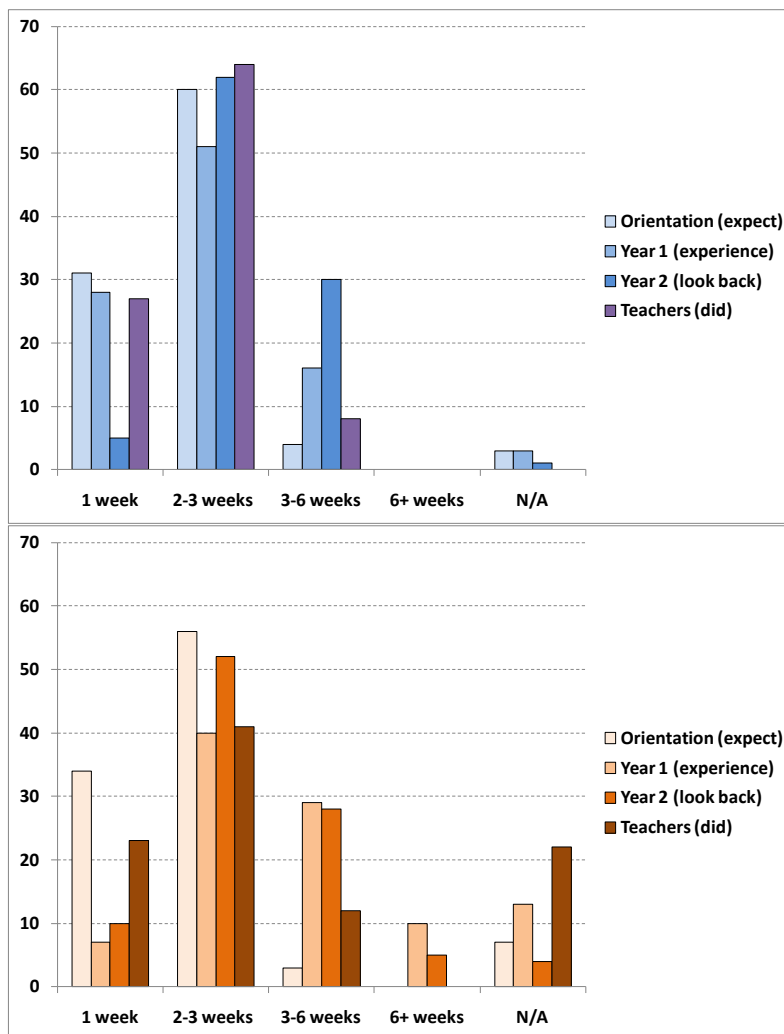
Item theme	At orientation % agree		End of year % agree		Year 2, % agree		Teachers, % agree	
'Ready access' to academic staff	88	89	61	50	73	57	64	94
Feedback on submitted work	97	97	66	37	74	48	100	59
Feedback on DRAFTS of work	94	91	20	7	21	26	0	22

Feedback on drafts would be one way of building into assessment an ipsative, or self-referencing of progress, dimension. To do this would require the assessment approach to be an integral part of the pedagogic approach – a non-trivial matter of curriculum design. Hughes' (2011) ideas regarding ipsative assessment are, in their fullest form, almost certainly too ambitious for any higher education provision that is under economic constraint.

Figure 2, based on the fourth of the items extracted from Brinkworth et al (2009), shows how expectations and experience can vary. Allowing for the previously-noted implausibilities, there is nevertheless evidence in the case of the science students that expectations and experience were discordant.

Figure 2 Expectations and experience regarding the time taken for the return of submitted work

(blue = Humanities; orange = Science).



Feedback on drafts

In two surveys carried out at a research-intensive university in Australia, G Crisp et al (2009) found that, in both 2006 and 2007 (N=979 and 1774, respectively), 87 per cent of respondents agreed that 'Having 'ready' access to my lecturers and tutors outside of face-to-face teaching will be important to my success': this figure was replicated in a subsequent survey of students prior to enrolment at three universities in South Australia (Scutter et al, 2011). This is hardly surprising. In 2006 Crisp et al found 52 per cent of their respondents agreeing that 'I expect my teachers to read drafts of my work'. Since raising the issue in this way was felt by staff to risk setting up expectations that could not be fulfilled, the item was changed in 2007 to 'Feedback on my DRAFTS of work will be important to my learning'. This 'safer' item attracted overwhelming agreement (92 per cent) and Scutter et al (2011) found a similarly high level of agreement (95 per cent) in their South Australian survey: these findings are also not surprising. Crisp et al further found that, across both years, roughly one third of respondents expected their work to be returned within a week, with just over half of them having the more relaxed expectation of the return of their work within two or three weeks.

The expectation that feedback would be given on drafts was considered by staff to be unrealistic in the prevailing circumstances, especially where classes were large: return of work within a week was seen as similarly unrealistic.

However, Lumsden et al (2010) found that 84 per cent of those studying Early Childhood Studies at a post-92 university in England indicated that their work was always, or often, marked as a draft, and 88 per cent indicated that they were always, or often, given advice to improve their work. Model answers were always received by 57 per cent of respondents, and sometimes received by a further 33 per cent. Personal tutorials intended to support the production of assignments had been experienced by 59 per cent.

Timing of formative feedback

Especially in the early stage of the first year, feedback is important to students since it begins the process of developing an understanding of the standard of work that is expected in higher education. The following quotation succinctly makes the point:

At the beginning you have no idea what constitutes a pass as you have no frame of reference. Need feedback on earlier work before progressing to next assessment.

(Student from a large group; chartered university: Johnston and Kochanowska, 2009, p.32).

Feedback sometimes arrives too late to be useful, since the student may by then have moved on to a different study unit. This is a particular risk with programmes that are unitised into short (typically semester-long) modules of study, since there may be little subject-related 'carry-over' between the modules. The problem can be intra-modular as well as inter-modular. Some examples illustrate the point.

A survey by Potter and Lynch (2008) asked students from the University of the Sunshine Coast to respond to an item regarding the timeliness of feedback. A quarter of their 304 respondents indicated that their work was always marked and returned before next item submitted, and just under half indicated that this was 'sometimes' the case. The remaining respondents were divided, in descending order of frequency, between 'occasionally', 'rarely' and 'never' (p.8). One wrote:

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.

Murphy and Cornell (2010, p.46) report a student's disparaging comment relating to feedback on a diagnostic piece of work:

It took ages ... about two months ... by that time I guess you had forgotten ... we had already wrote (*sic*) another essay.

In similar vein is the following:

... in [Subject 3] they have a formative which is supposed to help you with the summative after it, but we have not had the work back from the formative before we had to do the summative! ('Muzta', in Duncan, 2007, p.277.)

The pointlessness of such slow feedback on preparatory assignments needs no elaboration.

A key issue: 'the deal'

Within reason, a key issue is what the students can legitimately expect of their institution as regards feedback. The institution needs to be explicit about the nature of 'the deal' between it and the students.

Comments and marks

Language and tutors' intentions not understood

In a literature review conducted for the Higher Education Academy, Harvey et al (2006, p.20) observed that

there is one often-overlooked issue relating to assessment; that is the language of assessment. It is important that students understand the 'discourse of assessment' and that they have a shared understanding with their teachers.

At the time the review was being conducted by Harvey et al, Chanock (2000) was one of the relative few who had looked at language and understanding. She studied the meanings ascribed by staff and students to the comment 'too much description or narration, and not enough analysis', demonstrated variability in understanding, and found herself baffled by this particular comment on one student's essay: 'Analytically, it is rather undernourished' (p.96). (What hope is there for the student, then?)

Higgins et al (2002, p.56) reported that only 33 per cent of their student respondents claimed to understand assessment criteria as expressed in academic language. In their study of student achievement in six course units (of which three were first-year units), Hounsell et al (2008) found a substantial minority of students in several units who indicated that they were not clear about what was expected in their assessed work. In one attempt to bring greater clarity to assessment, Price and Rust (1999) developed a grid of aspects of performance backed up by indicative levels of performance set against the levels of the honours classification system in the UK. An example ('conceptualisation') is drawn from the set of aspects headed 'Thinking/analysis/conclusions' (Table 2).

Table 2 Performance levels specified for 'conceptualisation'.

Adapted from Price and Rust (1999, pp.134, 137)

A/1st	B+/2.1	B/2.2	C/3rd	Refer/Fail
Able to recognise consistency and reconcile inconsistency between information using cognitive and hypothesising skills	Consistent understanding demonstrated in a logical coherent and lucid manner.	Demonstrated understanding in a style which is mostly logical, consistent and flowing.	Attempts to demonstrate a logical and coherent understanding of the subject area but aspects become confused or underdeveloped.	Understanding of the assignment not apparent, or lacks a logical and coherent framework, or the subject is confused or underdeveloped.

There are many sets of performance criteria in use across higher education in the UK which use similar kinds of wording to that of Table 2, and it to some extent unfair to single out this particular – and innovative – example for comment⁹. Reviewing the effectiveness of the grid, it became clear to the researchers that students had found some difficulty with the language (its complexity and the use of ‘technical’ words) and with the grid’s generic nature (i.e. not relating directly to the task in hand). Given the need for some changes, the key to success was the engagement of staff and students in dialogue about what the grid implied for the latter’s work.

The overarching point about language is that meanings of relevant terms vary with the user and the context, and that interpretation by recipients of feedback is problematic.

Comment that is too uninformative or brief to be useful

Language and communication are of central importance to feedback on students’ work. Qualitative studies have elicited many comments on the failure of feedback to inform adequately. A few examples are all that is needed to illustrate the point.

Terms like ‘check spellings’ and ‘more depth’ are unhelpful, just as are vague phrases like ‘this is unclear’. (Student 1, Orsmond et al, 2005, p.377)

... we usually had a tick or something circled to say something was wrong. Usually we could work out what went wrong but some analysis of what was lacking would have helped in future assessments. (Weaver 2006, p.387.)

No feedback other than a series of ticks, leaving no clue as to what marks were lost and for what. (Potter and Lynch, 2008, p.7.)

I hate it where you get those feedback forms where they’ve just checked boxes that say this was done, that wasn’t done. That doesn’t actually tell you anything ... There needs to be a fair bit of content; just as they want to know what I’m getting at in the assignment, I want to know what they’re getting at in the feedback. (Crawford and Hagyard, 2011, p.66.)

‘The essay doesn’t flow’ is a comment I get frequently. I still don’t know what they mean. Red pen on your work or just exclamation marks; what’s the message? If there is no more explanation students just leave it and move on. (Second year student, nursing degree, in Bailey, 2009, p.5.)

When tutors use words like ‘critical evaluation’ nobody challenges them. Teachers when they try to explain words like ‘analyse’ don’t do it in the same way. ‘Analyse’ and ‘discuss’ – they don’t really mean different things do they? (Mature-age student, first year of a diploma programme, excerpted from Bailey, 2009, p.7.)

⁹ An important issue, not discussed in this paper, is the fuzziness of the categories and hence the difficulty of judging performances. See Sadler (2005) and Yorke (2008) for discussion.

A further issue relating to informativeness is the legibility of the markers' comments. Some tutors, according to Potter and Lynch's (2008) study, seem to have had handwriting of a quality more often (and stereotypically) attributed to the medical profession (p.8).

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.

Some of Huxham's (2007) students also commented on tutors' poor handwriting.

Comments outside stated assessment criteria

Where assessment criteria are provided¹⁰, there is an expectation on the part of students that these will be the reference points against which the students' achievement is assessed. Other considerations are, at times, brought into play – indeed, Walvoord and Anderson (1998, p.99) suggest having a 'fudge factor' in the marking scheme to reward a student's improvement. Their fudge factor does at least have an acknowledged purpose. Sadler (2010) however argues trenchantly against including in assessments matters that are not directly related to the demonstrated level of achievement (rewarding improvement, in Sadler's view, should be done in ways that do not involve assimilation into the grade).

The use of criteria outside the specification may simply be an *ad hoc* responsiveness on the part of the assessor, implied in the following quotation.

Feedback I received from my coursework picked up on things I had missed, but the things mentioned were not part of the assessment criteria. (Weaver, 2006, p.389.)

Webster et al (2000), though commenting on assessments of dissertations (and hence not first-year assessments) noted that 'comments were found which did not seem to relate to any published criteria (or if they did it was not explained how)' (p.76).

There is a broader issue that cannot be pursued here, but can be posed as a pair of connected questions. Should assessors be free to comment outside the purview of the prescribed assessment criteria, and – if so – should the comments have a bearing on the grade? Or, putting the matter another way, should intended learning outcomes be the sole determinants of assessment outcomes and feedback?

Focusing on grammar/spelling and/or on the subject

Glover and Brown (2006) found that about one fifth of the provision of feedback to science students at Sheffield Hallam University related to errors in spelling or grammar¹¹, though tutors varied in the extent to which corrections of this type were pointed out. The authors

¹⁰ In a study at Monash University, Pargetter et al (1998) noted that students exhibited 'a strong and consistent desire for guidance, instruction and support in the planning and completion of assessment tasks, rather than assessment with no statement of expectations or criteria...'

¹¹ For science students at the UK Open University, the proportion was much lower, at 5 per cent.

seem to feel that a focus on spelling and grammar is excessive and perhaps pedantic. If the focus is on the academic subject matter, then their perspective is understandable. If account is taken of the often-stated grumbles of employers (recently expressed by Arum and Roksa, 2011, p.143) that the communication skills of graduates are inadequate, one might take a different view. In the end, what can (or should) be done is subject to the ever-present constraint of institutional economics.

Lack of congruence between comments and mark

Webster et al (2000, p.76), though writing about undergraduate dissertations, give some examples of apparent lack of congruence between the mark awarded and the comments made. One example is ‘this is a clear, well presented [dissertation] ... which fulfils its specific aims’. The mark awarded was 49%, consistent with third-class honours in the UK.

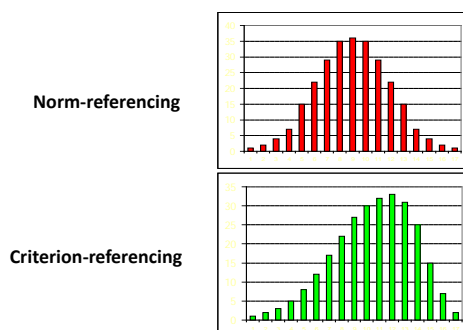
Brown (2007), who undertook a small-scale qualitative study of students in Scotland (and a handful from Hong Kong), noted students’ concerns over the consistency between the comments and the mark. One of his respondents said:

if you took a bundle of ticked grids, and a bundle of comments, there’s no way you’d be able to match the one with the other. And if you put marks into that too ... there would be no correlation. (ID 7:5, from Brown 2007, p.41.)

Understanding the mark

There are two competing approaches to assessment – norm-referenced and criterion-referenced. The use of intended learning outcomes in curriculum specifications implies criterion-referencing. However, assessment in higher education has yet fully to throw off the legacy of what might be termed the ‘psychometric tendency’ with its associated norm-referencing (see Shepard, 2000). The difference in the distributions of grades quite likely under norm-referencing and criterion-referencing is illustrated schematically in Figure 3.

Figure 3 A schematic illustration of the likely distributional implications of norm- and criterion-referencing (high grades are to the right of each histogram).



To some, a distribution dominated by high grades (quite possible under criterion-referencing, since all students could perform well against the intended learning outcomes), is somehow

‘wrong’. There may be ‘too many A grades’ for comfort. Whilst there are broader points to be made in arguments about grade inflation, the issue here is the extent to which both staff and students appreciate the distributional implications of their assessment methodology. There are also cross-cultural differences in grading, which are important where students enrol in a system that differs from that to which they are accustomed. For example, marks in the US tend to be higher than those in Australia, which in turn tend to be higher than those in the UK.

A key issue: clarity

A ‘message’ that is readily apparent from the evidence is the importance of clarity in informing students about the strengths and weaknesses in their work, and in respect of how they might improve future submissions of work.

Reacting to feedback

Students responding to, and acting upon, feedback

Students’ and staff’s conceptions of the purposes of assessment may be discrepant, as Maclellan (2001) found. If students are not clear about these purposes, if they do not appreciate their responsibilities in respect of feedback, and if the signals they receive from actual assessments are unclear, then student success is likely to be compromised.

A small-scale qualitative study, by Orsmond et al (2011), of the practice of six academic staff in biological sciences in providing feedback showed, alongside their commitment to explaining misunderstandings and correcting errors, the existence of an implicit belief that students would know (as a matter of course) how to use feedback. However, a number of the 19 second-year students interviewed as part of the same study provided evidence of a limited appreciation of what the provision of feedback was intended to achieve. (If this is representative of the position regarding *second-year* students, what are the implications for first-year students?)

Huxham (2007), in a study of students on ecology modules, found a preference for both model answers (the subject matter lent itself to these, which is not always the case) and personal feedback over either method alone. Model answers were considerably less popular than personal feedback: the latter was felt by a number of Huxham’s students to be indicative of empathy, and – as Lizzio and Wilson (2008) found – it also indicates the engagement of staff with what the students have produced. Student achievement, however, turned out to be superior where model answers had been supplied instead of personal feedback. The two separate approaches seem complementary, in that personal feedback can, particularly well, provide indications of where the student went wrong, whereas model answers can indicate how he or she should perhaps have responded to the assignment.

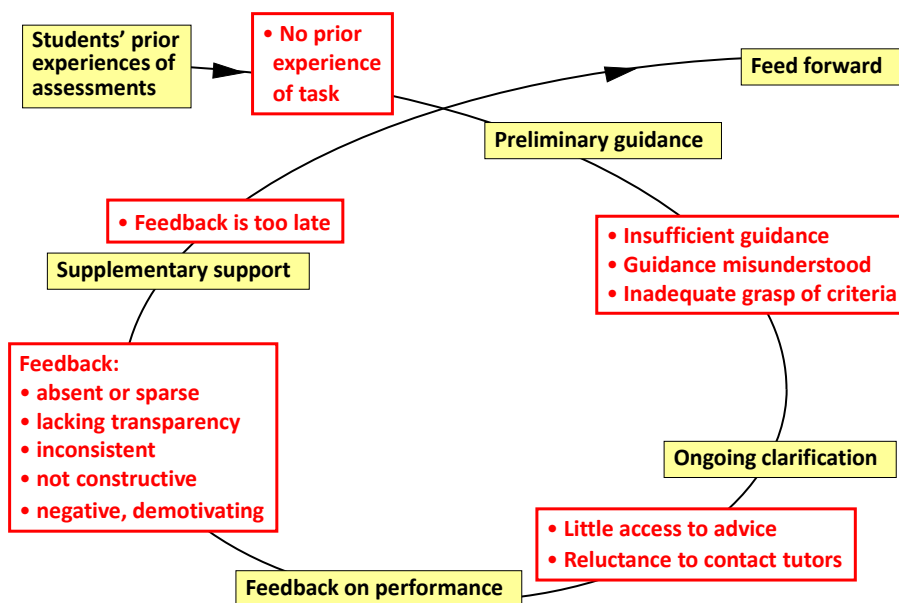
The evidence from students regarding their use of feedback seems to be mixed. Where they are intrinsically motivated, they tend to heed feedback and to develop their learning accordingly (e.g. Higgins et al, 2002, who inferred a connection between intrinsic motivation and deep learning on the part of some first-year students). The larger problem probably attaches to students who are extrinsically motivated. Their personal performance goals draw

them towards ‘getting the grade’ rather than towards learning; towards surface rather than deep learning. Motivation, however, is but one of a number of personal aspects that affect the extent to which students can gain from assessment and feedback.

Disjunctions in the feedback loop

Yorke (2003) and Hounsell et al (2008) schematically illustrate feedback systems, albeit from slightly different perspectives. The latter have built into their diagram an indication of points at which the ideal ‘flow’ of events can suffer disruption (Figure 4). Figure 4 is self-explanatory, and suggests points for evaluative attention and possible action.

Figure 4 Potential disruptions to the feedback/feedforward loop (after Hounsell et al, 2008, p.66).



Transferability not perceived

Carless (2006, p.225), writing about a survey of students in Hong Kong¹² that attracted 1740 responses from eight institutions, noted:

A number of students commented that they could not improve much from the lecturers' comments because they were specific to a particular assignment and so did not provide support to do better in another assignment for a different module.

Similar sentiments regarding the specificity of feedback were expressed in a small-scale study by Duncan (2007, pp.275-6).

¹² Carless makes the point that the difference between students in Hong Kong and elsewhere, as learners, are sometimes misconceived or exaggerated.

A key issue: encouraging engagement with feedback

The evidence indicates the importance of distinguishing between feedback that is specific to the assessed item of work and that which is intended to have transfer-value across cognate study units (and perhaps across a variety of study units). The bigger issue is that of design curricula that deliberately encourage students to engage with formative feedback.

Staff approaches

Tutors' espoused theories about feedback out of sync with practices

Whilst academics often express broad and wide-ranging views about the purposes of feedback, and their actual practices, there can be a disjunction between beliefs and practices (see e.g. Maclellan, 2001; Orrell, 2006; Orsmond and Merry, 2011). The reasons for such disjunction are undoubtedly complex, but the various political and economic pressures on institutions must be implicated to some – perhaps to a considerable – extent. Orrell (2006, p.453), who undertook a detailed qualitative study with a relatively small number of academic staff, noted:

Academics claimed that, despite their attempts to achieve some balance between the formative and summative purposes, ultimately the summative ones dominated, thereby producing expediency in academics' assessment behaviour, and poor learning habits in students. Academics felt pressured into reducing the learning challenge and ambiguity in assessment tasks, and in doing so compromising the quality of learning they espoused as desirable in higher education. Academics argued that grading forced students into learning to pass rather than learning to learn, and pressured academics into teaching students to pass rather than using assessment for encouraging learning.

This is to some extent reminiscent of Torrance's (2007) stricture from TAFE-like education regarding the constraint on the development of autonomy (noted earlier), and points back to the tension between performance goals and learning goals, and to the desirability of an academic culture that stresses learning.

Assessment comment as monologue

Shared understanding (see above) implies dialogue between staff and students regarding assignments, assessment criteria and feedback comments. BR Crisp (2007), for one, notes that the provision of assessment criteria followed by written feedback on assignments tends to be a one-sided affair rather than one involving dialogue. Unidirectional pronouncements, coupled with the inherent power differential in assessment, are probably non-optimal in respect of fostering students' intellectual autonomy.

Nicol (2010), in an article that opens up the issue of feedback and learning well beyond a teacher's (sometimes unheard) monologue, emphasises the importance of feedback as a contribution to a dialogue about expectations, achievements and standards. In a mass higher education system, where class sizes are large, Nicol's ideas are challenging. To follow them through would require a curriculum methodology that is both supportive of the dialogic approach and convincing to students. Expectations of peer feedback might be met with a

response drawing attention to the fees being paid and the belief that staff should be giving value for money (which might be seen in terms of both volume of subject content covered and feedback provided). An institution would need to be able to articulate to its potential and actual students why it is emphasising dialogic activities and how they fit into a philosophy of student development.

One might see the ‘feedback dialogue’ as an old-fashioned dance in which the partners co-ordinate their footsteps as they progress across the floor.

A key issue: the development of autonomy

If a broad purpose of higher education is to foster the development of autonomy in students, then the institutional values regarding teaching, learning and assessment need to be aligned to that end.

‘The personal’ in assessment

Hitherto, assessment and feedback have been mainly discussed from the standpoint of institutional provision. Students’ perspectives have not been given the attention they deserve. This section of the paper discusses a number of aspects of assessment from a more student-oriented standpoint.

Self-theories

Dweck (1999) drew attention to students’ beliefs about themselves. Some have a view of their intelligence and other characteristics as fixed, whereas others see them as open to development. Students who enrol in higher education with prior educational experiences that have not been particularly affirming of their potential may believe, like ‘Alice’ below, that they are not really clever enough to merit being at university.

I didn’ t think university was for me to start with. I thought I was thick. I just thought I couldn’ t do it. ... I’m one of those people that are never happy with what I do, I am. I can never do good enough as far as I’m concerned.
(‘Alice’, Black Caribbean, female, aged 31, in Leathwood and O’Connell 2003, p.608.)

A survey of some 2000 students across five universities in the UK suggested that more than a quarter may have held a view of their intelligence as fixed. If, as a smaller survey showed, a similar proportion of staff hold similar views, there is a potential for feedback to be less constructive than is desirable (see Yorke and Knight, 2004).

Emotion

Boud (1995, p.43) pointed out the potential emotional charge inherent in assessment:

We judge too much and too powerfully, not realising the extent to which students experience our power over them. Learning is an act which necessarily leaves us vulnerable ... We might find a secure spot or be exposed. Rarely are

we confident about what we know during the early stages (which include most of the time we are being taught) – the very stages at which we are mostly likely to receive the comments from the teacher. We know how little we know and we fear the depths of our ignorance.

With Falchikov, he revisited the theme of the emotional impact of assessment, in the light of a number of developments in the literature¹³. Falchikov and Boud (2007) illustrated their argument with a number of vignettes of students' emotional reactions to being assessed. These reactions were strong, and more were negative than positive (the authors were at pains to point out that their sample was small and could not be seen as representative).

Poulos and Mahony (2008, p.152) recognise the importance of factoring emotion into the giving of feedback:

For [first-year] students feedback goes beyond providing information on how to improve assessment marks. The 'effective feedback' for these students is that which provides emotional support and facilitates integration into university.

Although 52 per cent of the students responding to the 2009 YFCY survey in the US occasionally or frequently received emotional support or encouragement¹⁴ from their professor, 43 per cent reported having received negative feedback on their academic work (Ruiz et al, 2010, Table 11).

Self-confidence

Some students find their initial confidence in higher education slipping away as the reality of what is expected of them begins to become appreciated. Cameron (2008, pp.3-4), for example, found that whereas 23 per cent of around a hundred students expressed a lack of confidence in the fourth week of study, by the tenth week this percentage had risen to 40. At the fourth week, over 80 per cent felt that they would gain a high passes or credits but by the tenth week this percentage had dropped to 57. Only 1 per cent had anticipated failing, but 17 per cent actually did fail. Cameron notes that high-performing students were able to predict their grades with greatest accuracy. Cameron suggests that this might reflect study habits that were more effective¹⁵. Goldfinch and Hughes (2007) found that students who had left their programme during their first year in a post-92 Scottish university business school had lower levels of confidence in a number of aspects of academic study than those who continued. However, those who failed their first year had had *higher* initial confidence regarding academic studies compared with those who had passed. The authors suggested that overconfident students may not have felt the need to put the necessary effort into their studies.

Anxiety

Understandably, some first-year students are quite anxious about how successful they will be in their assessments. With older students who have entered higher education after a break

¹³ Their chapter provides a useful entry to the relationship between assessment and emotion.

¹⁴ It would have been preferable had emotional support and encouragement appeared in separate items, even though there is obviously a potential overlap between the constructs.

¹⁵ Other factors, such as less distraction from other commitments, might have played a part, but Cameron's study did not pursue these.

from study, the anxiety can be acute, as Young (2000) found with a group of ‘access’ students.

A couple of more recent examples illustrate the point.

I was really, really scared because it was my first report. I had to hand it in just to see where I’m at. Where am I standing? (‘Katya’, interview, in McGinty, 2011.)

I was very happy with feedback because most of it was positive anyway [laughter]. Because it had been my first essay ... and I was quite nervous about it and thinking ‘oh dear’ do I really know what I am supposed to be doing. A lot of questions in the back of your mind, but the way it came back it was like positive and it made me more confident ... (‘Gillian’, interview, in McGinty, 2011.)

In the following example, the status differential between student and academic seems to have been an unbridgeable barrier:

Feedback in [subject] is a problem, you’ve just given your assignment and then don’t get any help. It’s like they are too important and won’t touch us. They think they are better than us. (‘Debbie’, interview, in McGinty, 2011.)

Where the student body diverges from ‘the traditional’ middle-class school leaver, the social dynamic between students and staff becomes more complex, as Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) discussed in relation to ‘widening participation’ in the UK.

Pain

In addition to comments that the student may be unable to interpret, the manner in which feedback is provided has an emotional charge, as is shown in the following couple of quotations.

They are writing all over my work and it is like mangled up and most of the lecturers use red pen and I don’t know it kind of gets to me if I open it up and it’s covered with red crosses and marks and it’s horrible. It’s like my work is bleeding. (‘Josie’, interview, in McGinty 2011.)

Some of my lecturers - it’s just like, ‘this is wrong’ and just squish the whole thing with red pen, it’s like ‘where did I go wrong’ and it doesn’t help me really. (‘Student 10’, in Glover and Brown 2006, unpaginated.)

The language of these quotations testifies to the emotional pain that feedback can generate. The point is not to try to reduce the pain level to zero, since – as the saying has it – ‘no pain, no gain’: rather it is to appreciate that some aspects of feedback can, probably unwittingly, cause a level of pain that may be counterproductive.

In appreciation of the negative impact of red ink as correction¹⁶, and for other cultural reasons, some assessors prefer to use a less vivid form of marking on work printed as hard copy, such as pencil.

A key issue: the psychological dimension to assessment

The giving and receiving of assessment comment cannot be divorced from social-psychological considerations. The subjectivity that students bring to bear on assessment can have a significant influence on the extent to which what teachers want to happen actually does happen.

Balancing commitments

‘The personal’ also includes matters that have important social and/or economic dimensions (they also have psychological connotations, of course). Many commentators have noted that students often have to balance their commitments to study against other commitments in their lives. The configuration of commitments varies according to students’ circumstances, but has to accommodate, in addition to studying,

- earning money for part-time employment;
- caring for others;
- socialising;
- individual pursuits, such as hobbies.

(Yorke, 2006).

Commitments external to higher education have an impact on the way that students engage and also upon the results they achieve.

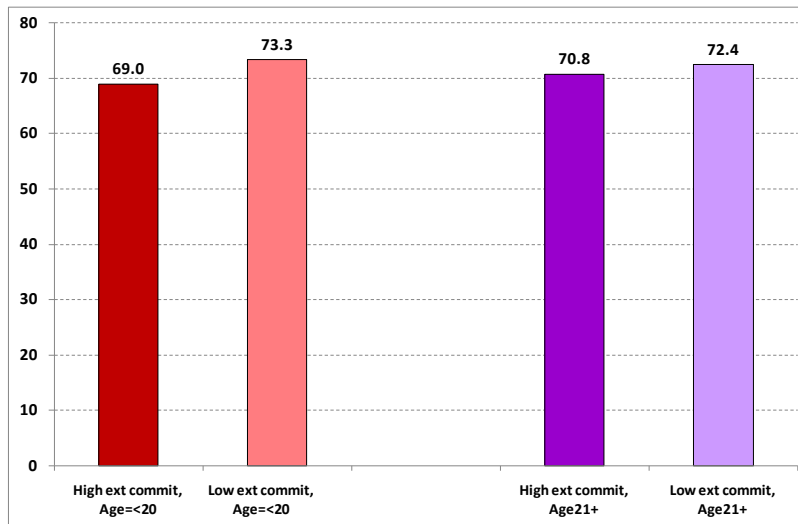
Ali Radloff, from the Australian Council for Educational Research, kindly undertook for this paper some analyses of data from first-year students’ responses to the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) administered in 2010¹⁷. There are three items that relate to external commitments of various kinds, and a crude overall index was constructed by rating responses on the three items as ‘low’ = 1; ‘medium’ = 2; and ‘high’ = 3. Respondents’ transformed scores for the three items were combined to give a scale running from 3 to 9: scale scores of 3 and 4 were taken as ‘low external commitment’; 8 and 9 were taken as ‘high external commitment’. Both young students (aged 20 or less) and older students (aged 21 and above) with low external commitment gained on average higher self-reported grades than their peers with high external commitment (Figure 5). This is as one would probably anticipate. There is a fair amount of evidence that high levels of external commitment (usually expressed in terms of part-time employment) tend to militate against the level of academic performance (e.g. Applegate and Daly, 2005; CHERI and South Bank University, 2005; James et al, 2010; Pokorny and Pokorny 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005 – the last-cited noting that off-campus employment, rather than on-campus employment, is deleterious). Although, as James et al (2010) point out, students vary in their reasons for

¹⁶ See Meehan (2007) whose guidelines for the University of Swansea regarding dyslexia include a specific acknowledgement of the point.

¹⁷ External students were excluded from these analyses. I am very grateful to Ali for conducting the analyses: the combination of variables and the interpretation of the outcomes are, of course, my responsibility.

undertaking part-time employment, it is the relatively disadvantaged (in various ways) who tend to opt for substantial part-time employment (see Yorke and Longden, 2007, p.8) and who are therefore disproportionately at risk of not achieving to their full academic potential.

Figure 5 Differences in self-reported grades, for young and older students, by level of external commitment.



What is more surprising – indeed, counter-intuitive – is that, on average, both young and older students with high external commitment claim to have engaged with academic staff to a greater extent than did their peers with low external commitment (Figure 6). One speculation might be that those who are heavily committed externally realise that, academically, they ‘have to make every available minute count’: if they cannot discuss grades or assignments fact-to-face, then this might have to be done electronically (Figure 7 hints at the possibility, as far as young students are concerned). A similar difference arose in respect of perceptions of feedback (Figure 8): this is difficult to interpret, but might reflect differing perceptions of the passage of time according to the ‘busy-ness’ of the students’ lives.

Figure 6 Percentages of first-year students who discussed grades or assignments with teaching staff, by age and level of external commitment.

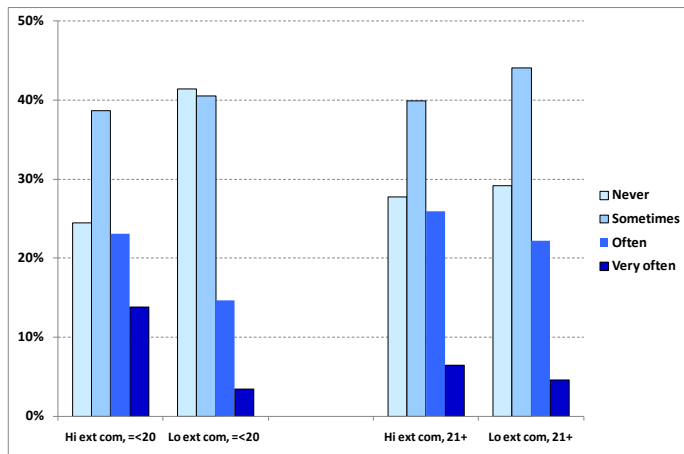


Figure 7 Percentages of first-year students who used email or a forum to communicate with teaching staff, by age and level of external commitment.

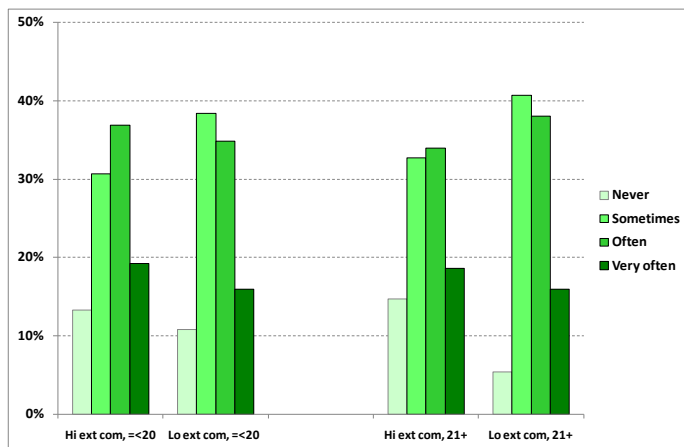
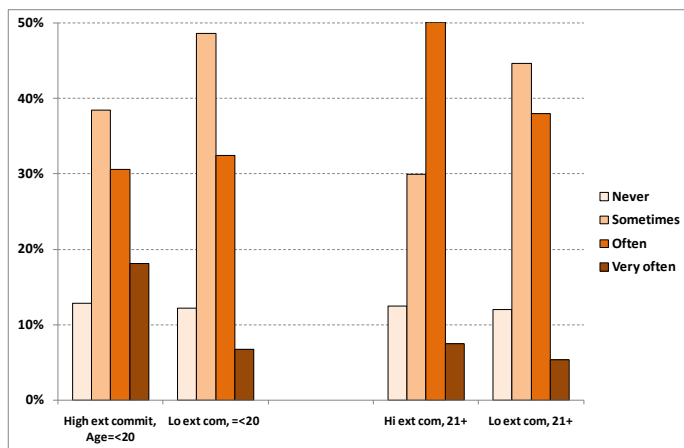


Figure 8 Percentages of first-year students who received prompt written or oral feedback on academic work, by age and level of external commitment.



A key issue: student engagement

The AUSSE data suggest that students who have high levels of external commitment tend to be more willing to take the opportunity to engage with staff regarding feedback than those who have low external commitment. If there is a problem regarding engagement with feedback, it may – perhaps surprisingly – lie with those who are comparatively ‘time-rich’ as regards academic study.

Relationship with academic staff

The evidence from earlier paragraphs of this paper is – a truism – that students’ relationship with teaching staff can be a powerful influence on learning. It is, to some extent, an artificiality to separate some aspects of student-teacher relationships out from the practical aspects of formative assessment that were discussed earlier. In this section, the practicalities are ‘partialled out’, leaving the focus primarily on issues relating to the student-teacher relationship.

Distance and power

Perceived ‘distance’ and/or a power differential can discourage students from engaging with academic staff. Hounsell et al (2008, p.62) provide examples, the one below illustrating the difference between school and university environments:

With us just starting university it’s different from school. [At] school you’re in a classroom with a teacher, they tell you what to do, if you don’t know what to do you can ask them as many questions as you like, whereas at university it’s not as simple to do that. (Student 2F V2.)

Potter and Lynch (2008, p.7) elicited the following illustrative comments (amongst others) from students.

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.

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.

Support from academic staff

Reason et al (2006) found, from a study of 6687 first-year students (full-time and part-time) at

campuses participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE] in the US, that the students' perception of the support they received was the single greatest influence on their development of academic competence (p.164).

Some students feel unsupported. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) noted that a dominant theme of the students in an inner-city university in the UK was a widespread desire for a greater amount of contact with, and support from, their teachers (p.610).

However, Kuh (2007) has noted, based on US studies using the 'Before College Survey of Student Engagement' [BCSSE], that first-year students expected to study more hours and achieve a higher grade than was borne out in reality, and that over half of university students expected *not* to have significant contact with their teachers outside the classroom (the expectation was borne out in practice). Arum and Roksa (2011, p.62ff) found that students from less advantaged backgrounds in the US were less likely to have contact with academics outside the classroom, giving the cycle of disadvantage and relative lack of success a further nudge.

Mentoring might help where the availability of staff for students is a problem. Hierdsfield et al (2008), in acknowledging the value of social integration for first-year Education students, examined mentoring by students further advanced in their studies as a possible contribution. In their 2005 round of mentoring, about a quarter of both mentored and unmentored students indicated that they had problems with assessment. Writing and referencing styles were mentioned by some as areas of difficulty. The success of the mentoring was mixed, for various reasons, but a number of quotations from the mentees indicate that this kind of support had been valuable. One mentee wrote:

Giving you someone to talk to (other than lecturers and tutors) about assessment and what's expected. Very helpful as it is a student's point of view.¹⁸

A key issue: dialogue as a component of the learning experience

Kuh (2007, p.4) has concluded, from a wealth of research in the US,

Students who talk about substantive matters with faculty and peers, are challenged to perform at high levels, and receive frequent feedback on their performance typically get better grades, are more satisfied with college, and are more likely to persist. While these and other educationally purposeful activities are positively linked to desired outcomes for *all types of students*, historically underserved students and those who are less well prepared *tend to benefit even more*. (Emphases in the original.)

Implications

The literature shows that there are plenty of nuclei of good and interesting practices regarding feedback, but also weaknesses. The evidence cited in this paper is patchy and variable in

¹⁸ The same quotation is recorded in respect of both the 2005 and 2006 rounds – presumably a drafting error.

quality. However, a synoptic overview suggests a number of ways in which the effectiveness of feedback can be maximised.

Some points (stemming largely from the work of Gibbs and Simpson, 2004-05; Kift and Moody, 2009; Nicol, 2009b; and other literature on assessment) that are particularly relevant to this paper are:

- The importance of clarity (in goals, assessment criteria, expected standards, grading and feedback¹⁹, and also in respect of what ‘the deal’ is regarding how and when feedback will be provided).
- The need for feedback to be timely (in order that students can make use of it).
- The need for feedback to fulfil two different functions – to offer constructively critical comment on submitted work as well as providing guidance as to future work (the feedforward aspect)²⁰.
- Particularly strongly in the early phase of a study programme, the need for the provision of feedback to take account of the emotional dimension in learning.
- Curricula need to be designed so that both student engagement and the chances of feedback being effective are maximised. (Implicit is the need overtly to encourage students to reflect on their learning and to develop autonomy, which includes the capacity to self-assess.)

Kift, in conjunction with a number of colleagues, has emphasised the importance of a ‘transition pedagogy’ in which student engagement is central, and which involves coherence between the various institutional components on which the students may draw²¹. Kift and Field (2009), echoing Tinto’s (1993) work on retention, point to the significance of addressing the social integration of students alongside academic integration. Particularly where there are ‘commuter students’, curriculum design needs to build in a social dimension which, from the point of view of learning, should (carefully and developmentally) provide opportunities for students to give as well as receive feedback.²²

Assessment and feedback are an integral part of pedagogy. Writing about the relationship between assessment and teaching, Orrell (2006, p.442) wrote:

Academics themselves routinely discuss assessment as marking , grading or correcting, which reflects a largely postscript view of assessment in relation to teaching and learning, and the provision of formative feedback as an add-on to teaching and learning responsibilities. Due largely to student and assessor workload formulas and demands, students are rarely required to reflect critically and act on feedback. Student response to feedback is largely optional. *This is not a problem of student motivation, but an omission in educational design* because of a failure to construe assessment and feedback as pivotal rather than a postscript to teaching and learning. [Emphasis added.]

¹⁹ A key issue is to avoid students getting ‘lost’ in academic discourse, so developing ‘academic literacies’ is fundamental.

²⁰ In providing feedback, it is important to be clear about the extent to which matters such as spelling and grammar will be dealt with.

²¹ Kift and Field (2009) is a useful entry-point for a range of material on this theme.

²² Kift and Field (2009, p.4) offer the view that pedagogical approaches at tertiary level should motivate students to learn if deep, effective and engaged learning is to take place. An alternative perspective would be to suggest that the pedagogical approach should *not demotivate* students: if students are not motivated in the first place, then they would be wiser to defer entry to (costly) higher education until such time as they develop a real desire to study.

Educational design is challenging. Nicol (2009a) provides a couple of examples (Psychology; French) where the first-year courses were redesigned to enhance the first-year experience (not least, by developing students' capacity for self-regulation), with technology making a significant contribution.

Educational design is particularly challenging where curricula are highly unitised. Given a blank sheet of paper, and being required to construct curricula to optimise student learning (especially in the first year), designers might well come up with curricular models rather different from many that are currently in place. However, there is no blank sheet of paper. As Neurath (1959, p.201) put it (though not with curriculum design in mind):

We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials.

Reconstruction is always going on, of course. Curricula undergo enhancement, some of which is relatively minor whilst some is wide-ranging. Of major significance for curriculum development for first-year studies is the conclusion by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005, p.646), from a weighing of considerable evidence, that

With striking consistency, studies show that innovative, active, collaborative, and constructivist instructional approaches shape learning more powerfully, in some forms by substantial margins, than do conventional lecture-discussion and text-based approaches.

Summarised in Orwellian terms: 'Active learning good; passive learning bad'.

Short, semester-long modules present particular challenges. There are curriculum design issues to be addressed. It is not enough to simply pronounce that feedback will be given in X weeks – for feedback to be optimally effective, it needs to be embedded in an academic culture that actively stresses learning, rather than passively expects learning to happen.

Contemporary higher education institutions have to focus, more than ever before, on diversity in their student bodies. To intra-national diversity of various kinds has been added international diversity. This involves striking a balance between what, with reference to young children, Piaget called assimilation and accommodation. ('Balance' sounds more clear-cut than the messy compromises that probably happen in practice.) As Zepke and Leach (2007) point out, the institutional need is to resolve the tension between integrating (assimilating) students into an existing culture, and adapting the institutional culture to accommodate diverse students by adjusting the culture (Piagetian 'accommodation').

It is no surprise that institutions that are adjudged to be particularly successful in terms of student development have a sustained commitment in that regard (see, for example, Mentkowski and Associates, 2000; Action on Access, 2003; Carey, 2005; Kuh et al, 2005). These institutions are not necessarily the most prominent, but they do have academic cultures that – in their different ways – place a special emphasis on the fostering of learning. They have found their own particular approaches to resolving the tension of competing imperatives upon them²³. A more strategic perspective has been laid out by Reason et al (2006) and Whittaker (2008).

²³ Johnston (2010) draws on his experience at Strathclyde University to offer a series of suggestions as to how the first-year experience may be made more effective.

At a time when discourse about higher education is dominated by financial considerations and the failure of students to develop to the extent they are expected to (e.g. Arum and Roksa, 2011), they have maintained a focus on the ultimate essential – a commitment to the moral purpose of higher education.

Acknowledgement

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