**Aspire Development Fellowship**

**Harper Adams University College**

**What is the range of assessment feedback provided by staff at Harper Adams University College and to what extent does the feedback help students to feed forward and improve their educational or learning skills?**

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**Acknowledgement**

# Report Summary

Assessment and feedback are recognised as critical drivers of the student learning experience (Nichols el al 2007)[1]. Recent surveys by the National Union of Students and studies by many Higher Education Institutions have identified that there are widespread difficulties experienced by students with both the quality and quantity of feedback on student assessments. In order to investigate and identify the issues and recommend suitable solutions at Harper Adams University College, Aspire Fellowship supported research was instigated in September 2009. The study examined the range of formative assessment feedback from 258 assignments across college, and has shown a wide variety of feedback styles and methods of delivery at Harper Adams University College.

The student's response to the feedback given by staff has been varied throughout the range of assessments observed, but the majority of students were positive about the feedback they received and most responded to constructive comments to give evidence that they feedforward with their educational skills.

The key issues identified relating to feedback were timeliness, legibility and the lack of constructive, personal comments in some cases. Recommendations for a college policy on guidance on effective feedback for staff and students are proposed.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Rationale for the research

The variability in the quality, quantity and timeliness of feedback in supporting a student's learning and education skills has been identified both nationally through the National Students Survey[2] and also through annual course monitoring for all courses at Harper Adams University College (HAUC)[3]. By assessing the range and quality of feedback across this institution, the value of the feedback in enabling students to feedforward was evaluated. The information collected provided an essential insight for Learner Support as to how staff can better support students with a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) with appropriate feedback, particularly for Dyslexic students.

### 1.2. The proposed research programme aims were to:

1. Assess the quantity of feedback (too much/too little?)
2. Assess the quality of feedback (does this help the students progress and is it supportive?)
3. Explore the range of support processes that students experience following the launch of assignment work and if this enhances the work they submit.
4. Assess the timeliness of feedback in allowing the students to improve other work submitted for formative assessment.

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[1] Nichols, D.2007: Leader for REAP project at University of Strathclyde . Available from http://www.reap.ac.uk/index.html
[2] NSS: Students satisfaction available on http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2007/nss.htm
[3] Annual Course Monitoring (copies available in registry)

### 1.3 Timing of the research

The *Aspire* Development Fellowship project examining the range of assessment feedback provided by staff at Harper Adams and evaluation of students' perception of this feedback, commenced in September 2009 and was completed in September 2010.

As a specialised provider of high quality, higher education courses for the land-based sector, HAUC has a relatively small student population in which a study involving students across all levels and subjects is achievable, to gain a whole institution evaluation of feedback within a short timescale.

## 2.0 Current research

Academic feedback may be defined simply, as the process of staff providing written and /or verbal constructive, encouraging comments to students on the quality and quantity of their submitted work. The comments should include any corrections and detail on how the work could have been improved, so the students can act positively and develop future work.  Feedback should also clarify the mark or grade awarded for the work.

Research studies of feedback fall into two main areas. Those projects and surveys undertaken by HE institutions, either individually or as part of collaborative work with others and the research completed  by the National Union of Students (NUS), which is clearly more user focussed.

Within HE research there is a wide range of investigations that have taken place, some of which have been more focussed on the methods of giving feedback, rather than the **effectiveness of feedback** to the students. Some research has been more subject or cohort specific and therefore evaluation of the quantity and quality of feedback may be less appropriate and generic to the HE student population as a whole. Interesting and valuable research on feedback has been commissioned by the National Union of Students, which has included a large number and range of students in the surveys across several Universities in the UK.

A project was undertaken by Juwah *et al* (2004)[4], Students Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback (SENLEF) across several Scottish HEI's, funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The project reflected on earlier influential work by researchers, including Sadler (1989)[5] who identified three conditions necessary for students to benefit from feedback. The student must:

• Possess a concept of the goal/standard or reference level being aimed for
• Compare the actual (or current) level of performance with that goal or standard
• Engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap.

Sadler argued that in many educational settings, lecturers give students feedback information on how a student's performance compares to the standard, but that this feedback often falls short of what is actually necessary to help students close the gap and develop further their learning skills.

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[4] Juwah, C., Macfarlane-Dick, D., Matthew, B.,Nicol, D., Ross, D. and Smith B. 2004. Available from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/assessment/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=resource_database/id353_effective_formative_feedback_juwah_etal&site=york
[5] Sadler, D.R. 1989. Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science* **18**, 119–144.

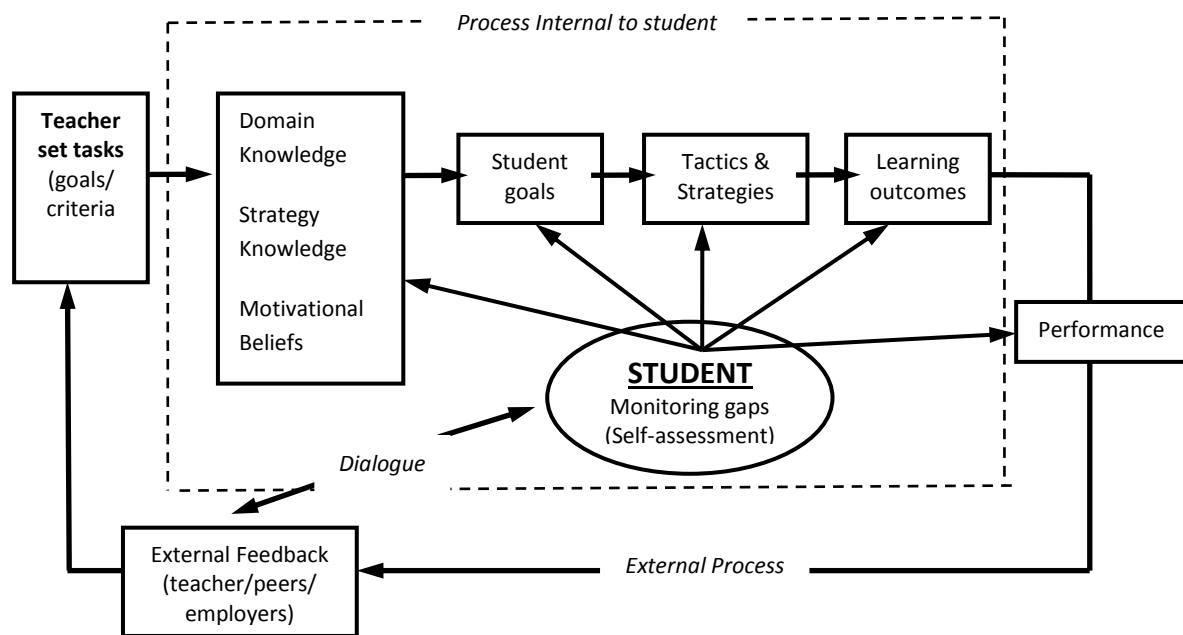Figure 1 below is based on a model of feedback and self-regulated learning originally published by Butler and Winne (1995)[6.]



**Figure1:** A model of feedback and self-regulated learning. Source: adapted from Butler and Winne (1995)

This model is clear in identifying the comparisons of progress and goals and the importance of students in receiving effective feedback in order to be able to feedforward and develop their learning skills.

Research by Yorke (2003)[7] stressed the importance of methods for getting the students themselves to take responsibility in responding to feedback. Students should always be involved in monitoring and assessing their own work, rather than just thinking of ways of enhancing the teacher's ability to deliver high quality feedback and York also surmised that we should be devising ways of building upon this capacity for self-regulation in order to improve feedback effectiveness.

The **SENLEF** project identifies seven principles of good practice:

1. Facilitates the development of self assessment (reflection) in learning.
2. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.
3. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards expected).
4. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Through the research for SENELF project, several examples for each of the seven good practice points were identified across the HEIs studied. The case studies ~~given~~ highlighted in the report give

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[6] Butler, D.L. and Winne, P.H. (1995) Feedback and self-regulated learning: a theoretical synthesis. *Review of Educational Research* **65** (3), 245–281.

[7] Yorke, M. (2003) Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and the enhancement of pedagogic practice. *Higher Education* **45** (4), 477–501.

constructive advice of how various aspects of feedback can be enhanced. This is supported also by the extensive earlier work on feedback published by Race (2001)[8].

Another more recent, large four year HEA funded project on feedback entitled 'Engaging students with assessment feedback' (ESWAF) investigated feedback at eight pre and post-1992 English Universities. Similar to the SENELF work, the researchers, Millar *et al* (2010)[9] identified that assessment feedback is integral to learning.

From the report, findings from the ESWAF project suggested that barriers to students' engagement with feedback included:

- Uncertainty among students about the purpose and value of feedback, which could have an adverse effect on readiness to engage and the nature of engagement itself. For instance, if feedback was seen as simply justifying the grade, then feedback that did not appear to relate directly to the grade might be ignored, creating a form of 'grade fixation' (Prowse *et al* 2007).
- A feeling that feedback was not relevant to future work. Some students interviewed suggested that they would only re-read feedback if they were doing a similar piece of work in the future or were likely to be marked by the same tutor.
- The calibre of staff/student relationships. Students (and staff) argued that good relationships support feedback engagement and bad relationships can act as barriers. This was particularly relevant in connection with discussing feedback. The ESWAF research suggested that many students wanted to reflect upon their feedback through discussions with staff, but were likely to do so only where they felt comfortable and that staff were approachable.

*(taken directly from the ESWAF report 2010)*

Further research which has looked at students' perception of feedback (as this study aimed to investigate) was made by Weaver (2006)[10]. Her research, showing that students would like feedback to be clearer (both in the language and legibility) with more constructive and positive comments and that it is needs to be related to the assessment criteria. Students also stated that good effective feedback allowed ~~then~~ them to reflect on what they have learned.

Work by Fritz *et al* (2000)[11]showed that prior learning experience of the student and intellectual maturity played an important part in their approach to learning and this is supported by earlier work by Wojtas in 1998[12] who surmised through his article in the Times Higher Education Supplement that students improved their work once they understand the purpose of feedback and assessment criteria.

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[8]  Race, P. 2001. Available from
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id432_using_feedback.pdf
[9]  Millar, J., Davis, S., Rollin, H. and Spiro, J. 2010. Engaging Feedback. *The Brookes University e Journal of Learning and Teaching*. Available from http://bejlt.brookes.ac.uk/article/engaging_feedback/
[10] Weaver.M.R.2006. Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written response. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* Volume 31, Issue 3 June 2006, pages 379 - 394
[11]  Fritz, C., Morris, P. and Bjork,R.2000. When further learning fails: stability and change following repeated presentation tests, *British Journal of Psychology* 91, 493 - 511.
[12]  Wojtas, O. 1998 Sept 25. Feedback? No, just give us the answers, *Times Higher Education Supplement.*

Hattie and Timperly's 2007 paper[13] on The Power of Feedback, identified that it is important teachers make academic goals salient for all students, because 'students who are prepared to question or reflect on what they know and understand are more likely to seek confirmatory and/or disconfirmatory feedback that allows the best opportunities for learning' (Hattie and Timperly 2007)

Research by Carless (2006)[14] investigated student's perceptions of feedback and identified four key elements:

- The amount of detail in the feedback
- The usefulness of feedback
- The extent to which students are only interested in the grades
- The fairness of marking procedures

Carless suggested that in order to avoid misunderstanding and misconceptions in the feedback process that assessment dialogues were necessary between staff and students. In this dialogue, discussion relating to the assessment process would be focussed to support and engage the student in their work and learning processes.

Only a few student feedback research projects are comparable to this Aspire Fellowship project, one of which was that undertaken by Walker in 2009[15], where analysis of over 3000 written comments on 106 assignments in three course modules in the Technology faculty, was made. Whilst the range of and number of modules and subject area was more specific than this proposed Aspire study, it did identify how useable the feedback comments were for the students. Walker's work found that a relatively high proportion of comments made on assignments were unlikely to be useable by the students. Other similar, but more limited research studies to this include work by Poulos and Mahony in 2007 and Lizzio and Wilson in 2008.

National Students Surveys highlight general dissatisfaction with 'complaints of ambiguity, lateness and negativity' (NUS 2008)[16], with 57% of students in most University departments expressing dissatisfaction with the standard of feedback they are receiving. In response the NUS[17] produced a briefing paper which outlines the ten principles of good feedback practice which suggested that feedback should:

1. **Be _for_ learning, not just _of_ learning.**
Feedback should be primarily used as a learning tool and therefore positioned for learning rather than as a measure of learn

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

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[13] Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. 2007. The Power of Feedback. _Review of Educational Research_, Vol. 77, No. 1, 81-112

[14] Carless, D. 2006. Differing perceptions in the feedback process. Studies in Higher Education, Vol31. Issue 2, 210 - 233

[15] Walker, , M. 2009. An investigation into written comments on assignments: do students find them useable?. _Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education_. Vol 34. Issue 1 Feb 2009. 67 - 78

[16] NSS 2008. Available from http://www.nus.org.uk/en/Campaigns/Higher-Education/Assessment-feedback-/

[17] The Great NUS Feedback Amnesty .2008. Available from http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/2008-Feedback_Amnesty_Briefing_Paper1.pdf and http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/HEFocus.pdf

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

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

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

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

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

**8. Include self-assessment and peer-to-peer feedback**
Feedback from peers and self-assessment practices can play a powerful role in learning by encouraging reassessment of personal beliefs and interpretations.

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

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

A extensive study of over 2400 students for an NUS/HSBC survey[18] in 2008 showed a significant majority of those interviewed, 78%, agreed that the feedback they receive made it clear how well they performed, however, the level of agreement reduced when asked if feedback makes it clear how they should improve their performance (57%), or if it motivates them to study (54%).This further supports researchers in the HE sectors that some feedback is neither constructive or supportive and is ineffective in allowing the students to feedforward and improve their work and skills.

### 3.0 The scope and approach of this research

The research work undertaken as part of this project, appears to be distinctive as the process of evaluation of feedback by the students has been an **ongoing process**, where the students have evaluated each module feedback and reflected on the staff observations and comment if they will take any action and improve future work accordingly.

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[18] Student feedback: NUS/HSBC survey 2008. Available from
\http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/Mini_Report_Feedback.pdf

The research focussed on getting feedback on assignments from students by using a number of information collection methods.

Students were randomly selected from a range of all courses across the University and were from all year levels from Extended Foundation Degree to Masters, including Foundation and Degree students. Initially it was intended that the sample set of students for the research would be approximately 60 students, but several failed to respond to email or attend the information and sign up meeting. A total of 40 students were recruited for the research, but the numbers were reduced to 38, with one student withdrawing from his course and one student failing to submit any feedback for the research.

26% of the sample group indicated that they had a disability compared with 17 % for all students at the college. Seven of these students indicated that they had a SpLD.

**Do you have any learning support needs?**

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ No response

2%

26%

72%
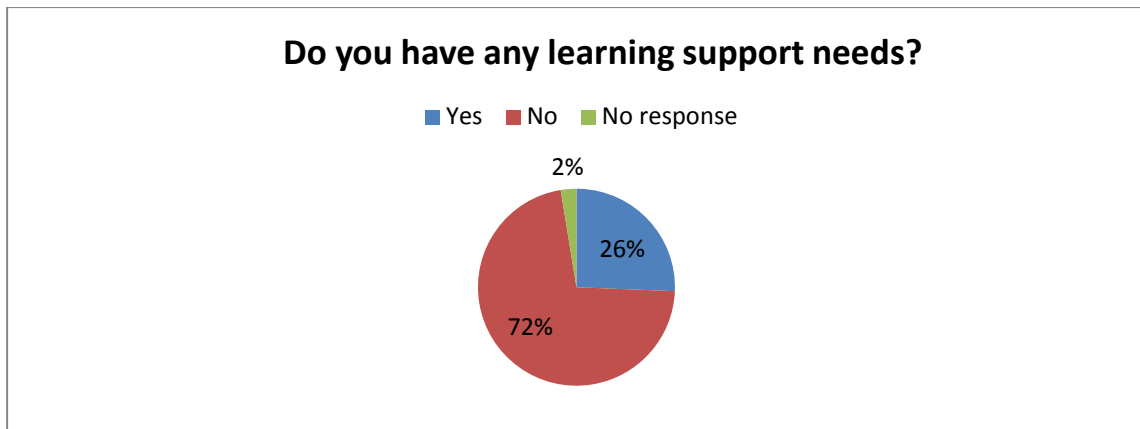
### 3.1 Methodology

*3.1.1 Introduction of the research and information from the students on their educational experience of feedback.*

A sample of students were selected at random and invited to attend a briefing session to explain the nature of the research and the benefits to students, staff and the current attending institution. All students who attended the meeting were asked to complete a questionnaire on their prior experience of feedback, what they prefer in feedback and whether they did anything about the comments made. This was used as a baseline to ascertain the prior use of feedback in the sample set of students.

Students were assured that all student names, their courses, module details and teaching staff would all be anonymous and all contact with the students complied with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004)[19]. Lecturing staff were not informed that the project on feedback was taking place, in order to avoid any bias over the research period.

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[19] Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research .2004. Available from http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/

Both the introduction questionnaire (Appendix A) and the assignment questionnaire (Appendix B) were initially piloted amongst colleagues and some students to determine its effectiveness. Students also indicated in the introduction questionnaire their requirement for any learning support needs e.g. Dyslexia.

### 3.1.2 The feedback sheet for formative assignments.

Students involved in the research were asked to submit their individual marked formative assignments and to complete a feedback questionnaire (Appendix B) to give a considered response and to reflect on the staff feedback on each of their module assignments. Assignments submitted were then recorded on a spreadsheet and copies taken of staff comments, after which the work was returned to the students.

Averages of seven assignments per student were submitted for the research evaluation ranging from two to fifteen submissions per student. A total of 264 assignments were submitted, although some of the research questions were from a slightly smaller sample (min 248 in some cases) due to some answers being occasionally omitted.

### 3.1.3 Feedback from the focus groups

Students were invited to attend one of two lunchtime focus group sessions held in February (11 students) and March (5 students) after the project had been running for a few months. This was to evaluate the students use of the feedback sheet and any issues regarding feedback that they wanted to discuss or that appeared to be coming from their responses from the questionnaires they had already completed and submitted. The discussions were open and forthright and all students were actively involved in the dialogue and issues raised. There was general agreement on most of the points considered.

### 3.1.4 One to one interviews

A total of ten students who had not attended the focus group session were selected at random for one to one interviews of 15 minutes with one of the research team staff. Nine students attended and gave in depth responses to questions about their individual feedback on their assignments. Students were also asked more open questions regarding their own ideas for improving the feedback experience feedback generally within HAUC.

**4.0 Research Results and Evaluation**

**4.1** *Introduction of the research and information from the students on their educational experience of feedback.*

The responses from the students for the introductory questionnaire are given in Appendix A and shown below.

**1. My comments on feedback come from**

■ School/FE College   ■ Other Universities I have attended   ■ My course at Harper Adams

- 39%
- 53%
- 8%
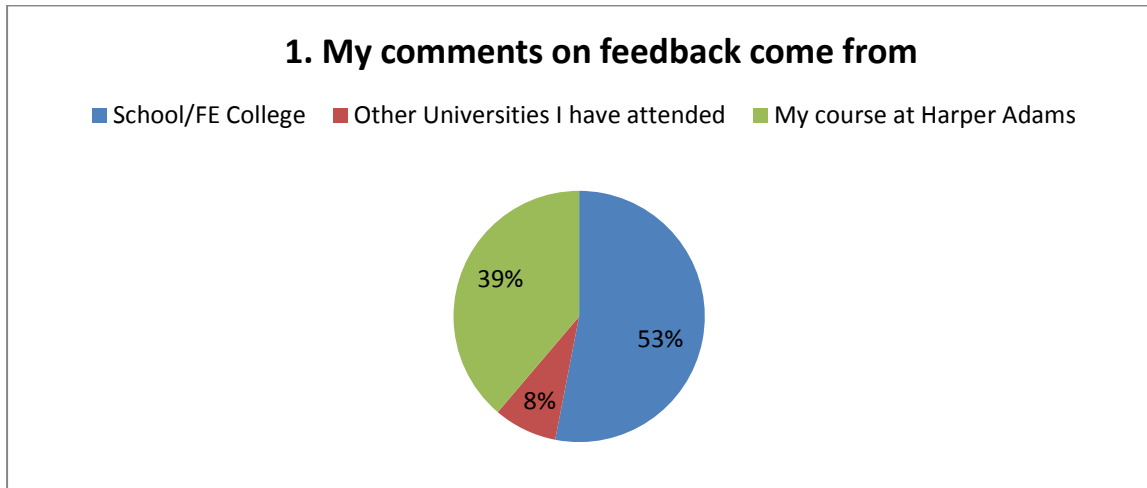
Fifteen of the thirty-eight students in the research group were first year or year 0 (Extended Foundation Degree) students, which may account for the higher number of comments that feedback experience comes from school or FE college. The student's experience of feedback will have varied considerably depending on the type of FE institution attended and whether a student has studied traditional A 'levels or studied a more coursework assessed qualification such as a National Diploma or BTEC.

**2. Have you found this feedback useful to understand where you have gone wrong and where you can improve your work ?**

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Sometimes

- 38%
- 59%
- 3%
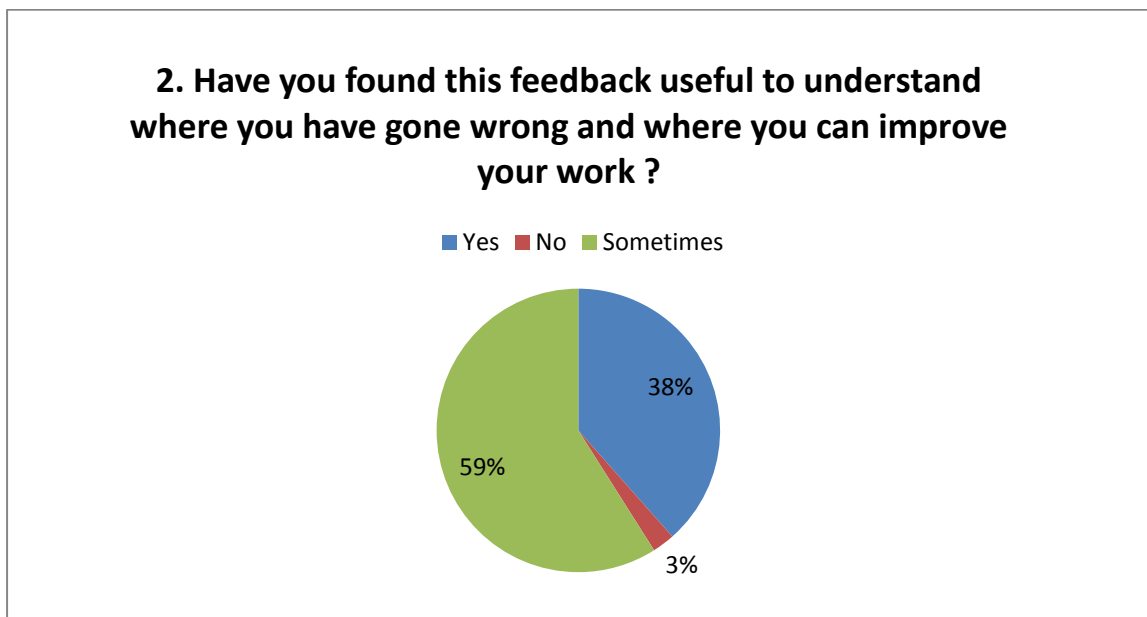
It would appear from the student responses that the feedback they have received in the past has been variable with the majority of students saying that only 'sometimes' did they understand where they had gone wrong and how to improve their work in the future. This is a more negative response that those given to the usefulness of feedback following the research study, which will be discussed later.

## 3. What sort of feedback do you prefer?

- Written on the script
- Written on a pre-prepared feedback form
- Verbal feedback from the tutor
- A mixture of written and verbal feedback

10%
8%
8%
74%
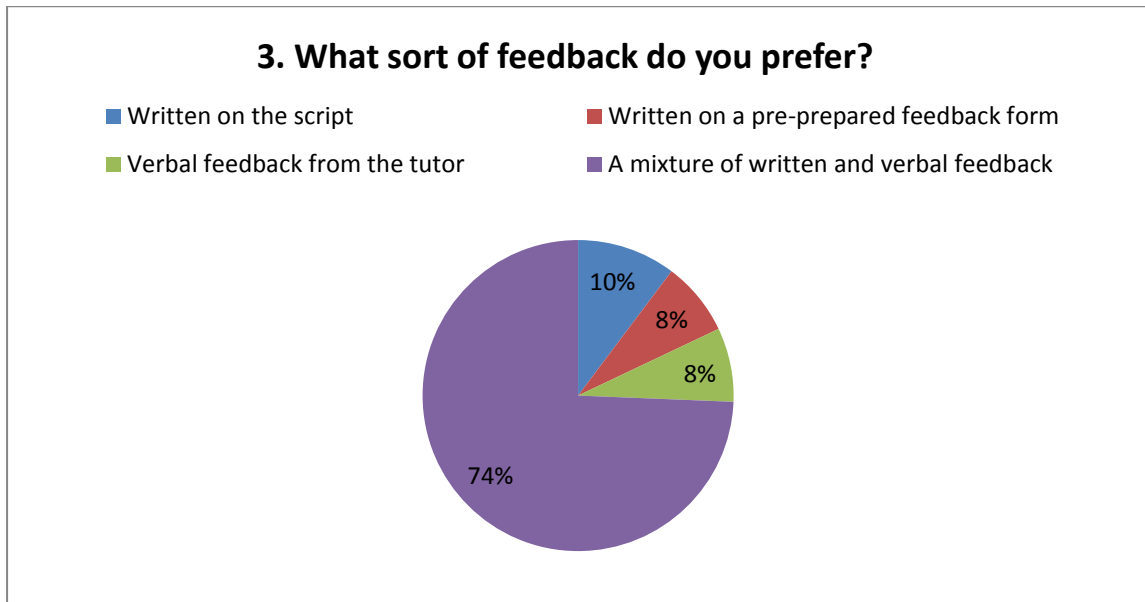
Most students seem to prefer a mixture of written and verbal feedback, again this in contrast to the actual formats of feedback they receive (see section 4.2). Written feedback on a pre-prepared form was scored much lower, yet the research from this study during the year, indicates otherwise. This may reflect the fact that few students have had experience of pre-prepared forms either prior to coming to HAUC or during their time as an undergraduate.

## 4. In the past have you improved your work by using feedback ?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

36%
59%
5%
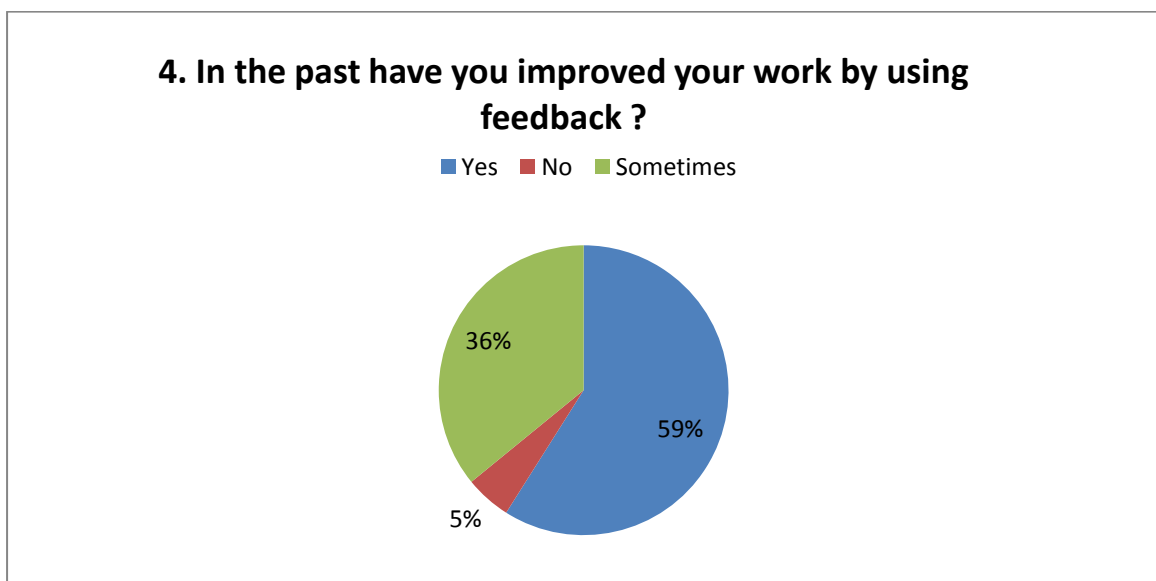
It is clear that students have stated that in the past, they have improved their work by using feedback given by staff. This was questioned in the individual student interviews.

**5. Important features of feedback that motivate and help you to improve your learning skills (1 = low, 6 = high)**
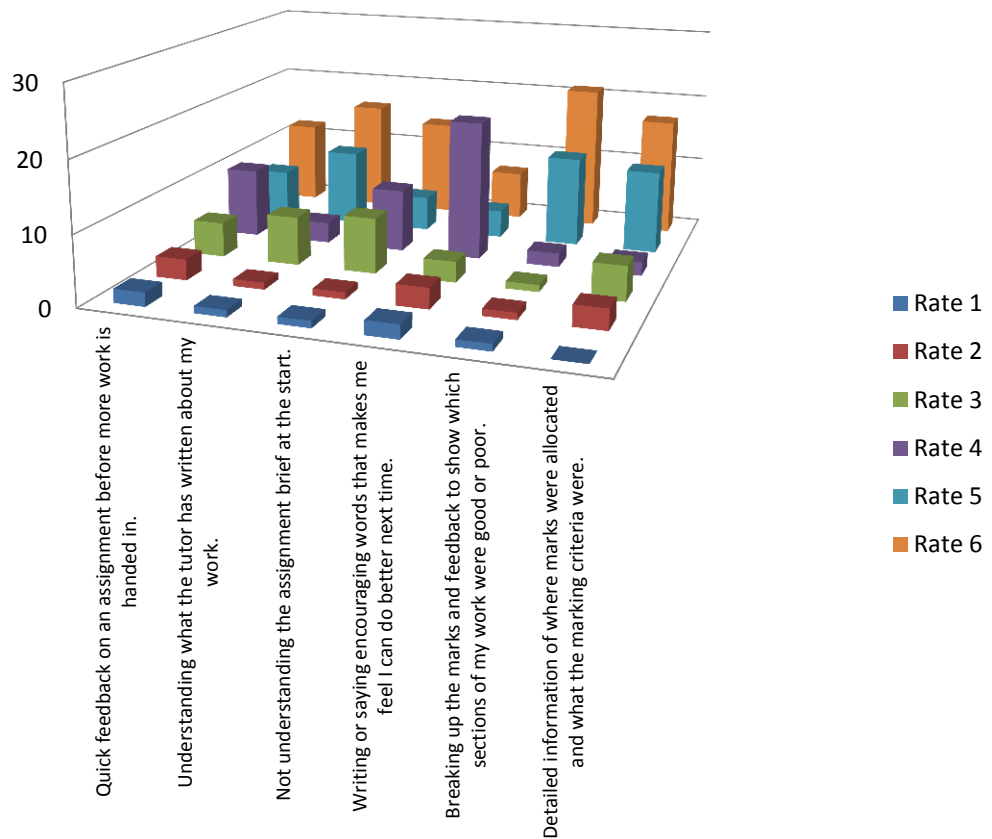


The most important factors of feedback students identified in motivation and improving their learning skills and the quality of their work were

- quick delivery of feedback and understanding what the tutor has said.
- understanding where marks have been allocated and the marking criteria.
- indication of strengths and weaknesses in the submitted work to support learning.

Students indicated in the free comments section that a feedback session and development workshop would be useful and that more support and discussion of the assignment brief would better direct students to produce the expected quality of assignments needed at University level, which is particularly important for first year students.

**4.2** *The feedback sheet for formative assignments.*

Data collected from the completed feedback sheets for each of the submitted assignments is presented below and evaluated.

## 1. Did you understand the assignment brief?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Not Sure

No 6%  Other 4%

Yes 90%

n = 254
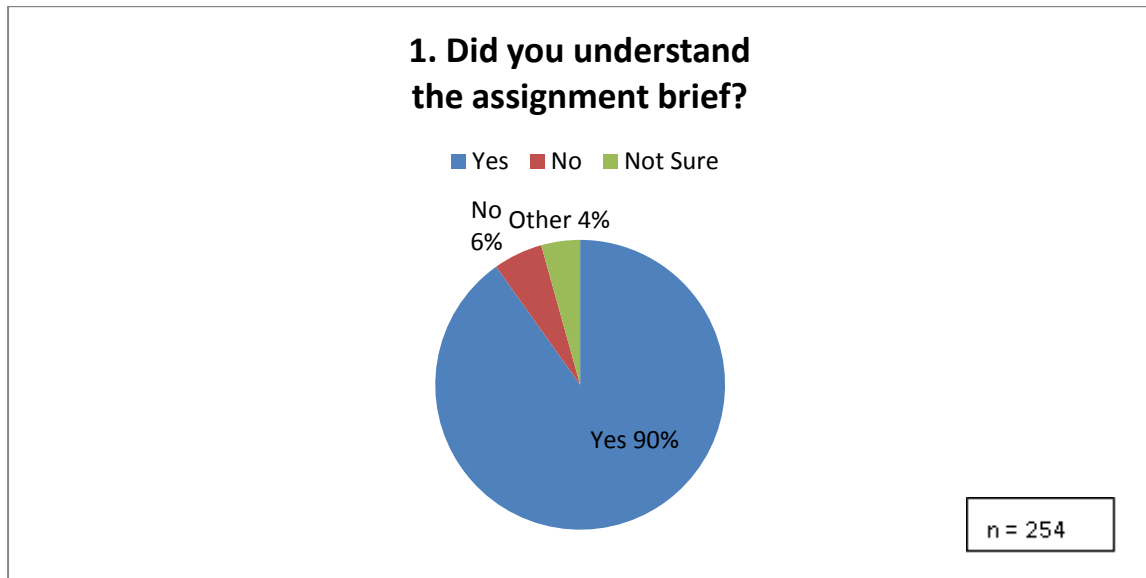
The majority of students appear to fully understand the task set for their assignment but one in ten students seem unclear. From the responses given, it is uncertain whether students were not sure because some verbal explanation in class was missed or staff were not approached for clarification. It would be interesting to investigate if there was correlation with the level of understanding the task and the quality of work produced and the marks awarded.

## 2. Did you go to staff for any help with your assignment?

■ Yes ■ No

46%

54%

n = 253
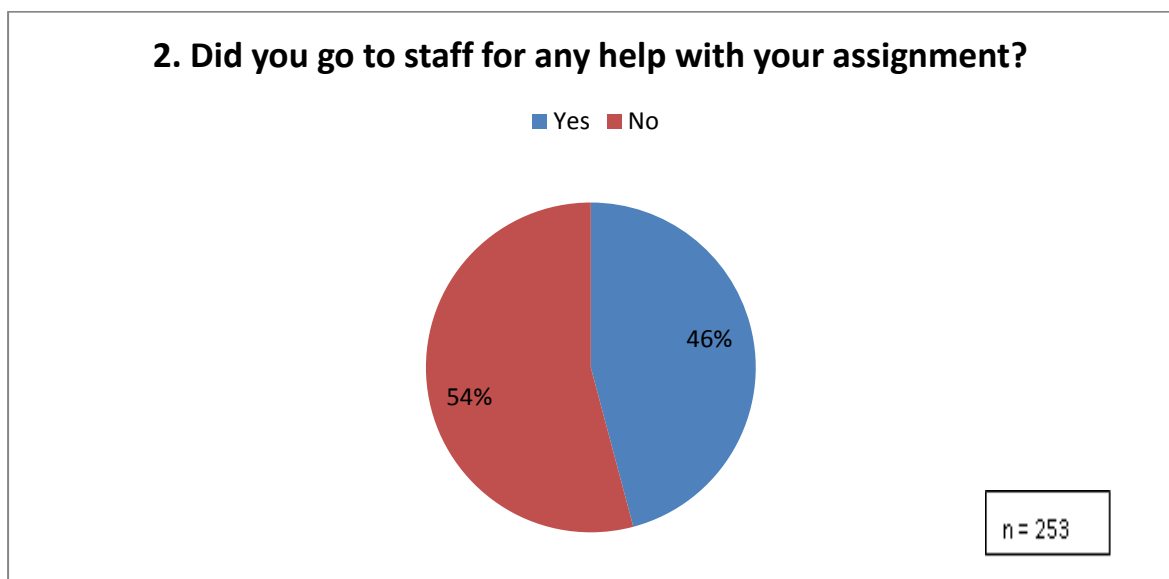
The results from question 2 indicate that a significant number of students do approach staff for help at some stage. This maybe in order to better understand the assignment task set or

perhaps the students is unclear what to include for the marking criteria. Further research would be useful to indicate what type and nature of support they received and whether this could have been included in the assignment details. Approaching staff for support very much depends on the confidence of the student, the approachability of staff and the availability and willingness of staff to give support when necessary.

**3. Did you use Learner Support for help?**

■ Yes ■ No

10%

90%

n = 253
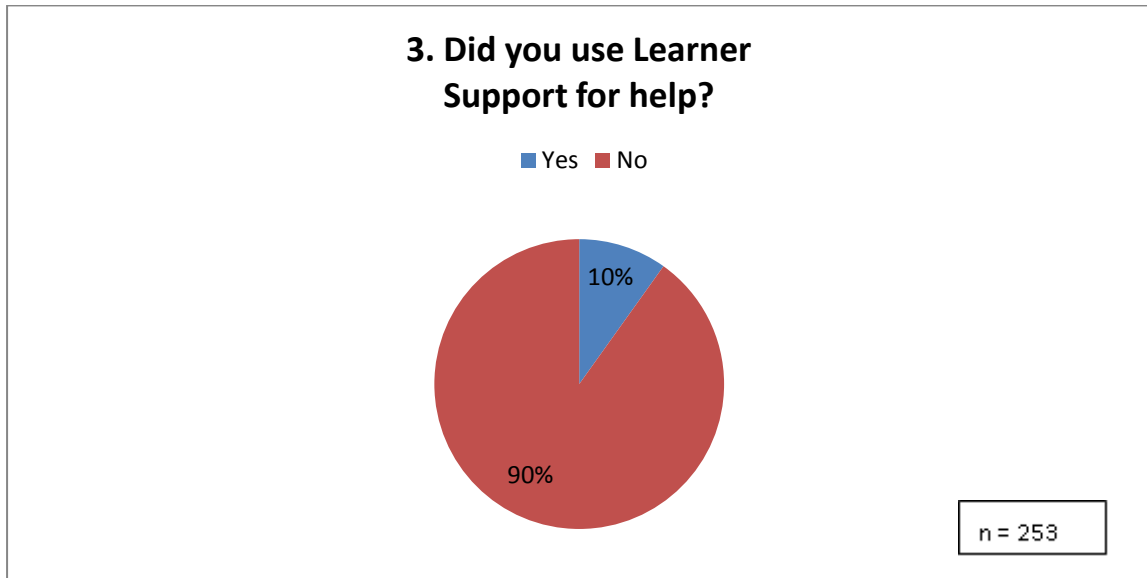
Several students in the study group will have regular sessions with Learner Support through their SpLD  to help them with assignments, whilst other students, although identified with a learning difficulty may only occasionally use Learner Support or not at all. Learner Support is available for all students, irrespective of diagnosed needs and several students may fail to get specialist support for numeracy skills when necessary (for example for the research modules)

**4. What was the type of feedback given to you?**

■ Verbal ■ Written ■ Combination of Verbal and Written

1%

24%

75%

n = 253
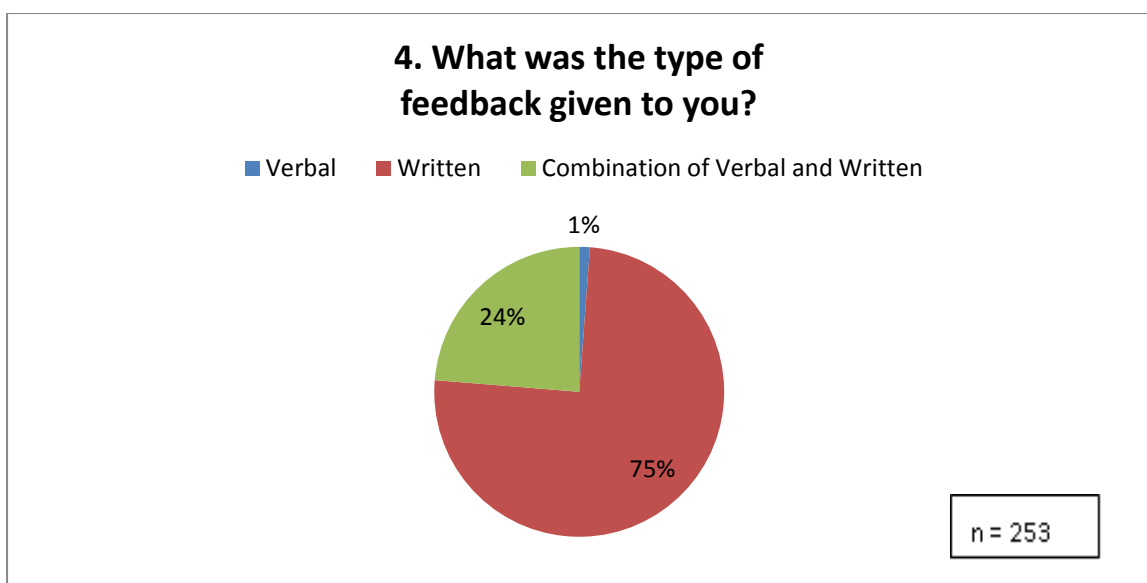
The majority of feedback given to students was in a written format but some also included the use of verbal feedback. It is unclear from this data whether the additional feedback  was given verbally to the whole class or on an individual basis and whether students  found this combination format useful.

The NUS/HSBC survey[20] showed that 25% of those surveyed, received individual feedback and 85% received written feedback (so some students must have received both formats) but 72% of students interviewed said that they would like to receive feedback in verbally. At HAUC 74% of the students in the introduction survey said they would like both forms of feedback from staff. The NUS/HSBC survey also showed that students in the early years of study were more likely to receive verbal feedback and that the post 1992 Universities were more likely to give verbal feedback to students. This research has not correlated the type of feedback to year levels but certain subjects lend themselves to more detailed verbal feedback for students and in particular the higher levels, where some module sizes are smaller, allowing this to be more practicable option for staff.

**4a Was the written feedback easy to read?**

■ Yes ■ No

No
6%

Yes 90%

n = 253
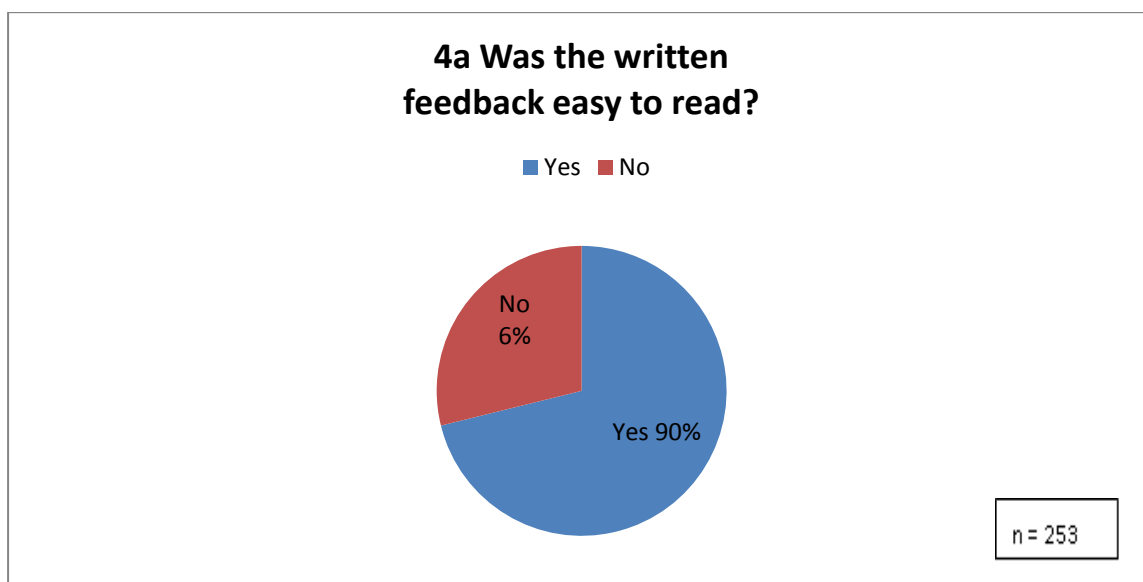
There appears to be significant issues with students being unable to read handwritten comments by staff. This was supported by both the focus group discussions and in the personal interviews. Students stated that if the mark was good then they often did not attempt to see staff to get the feedback explained or they may ask another student to decipher the handwriting.

The researchers for this project also found some of the handwritten feedback extremely difficult to read and in some cases totally illegible. Some of the students did see staff to seek clarification of the feedback but stated it did depend on the staff involved and the whether they were available to go over the work. From the staff perspective, it is challenging task to mark students work  accurately and give valid feedback in the short time frame given for marking with large groups. However feedback is useless if it cannot be read by the student and one way of

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[20] Student feedback: NUS/HSBC survey. 2008. Available from
http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/Mini_Report_Feedback.pdf

overcoming this problem would be to type feedback on a pre-prepared feedback sheet. Several excellent examples of these were being used successfully by staff across all departments and subject areas, which was well received by students in this research.

**4b Did you understand the feedback given?**

■ Yes ■ No

7%

93%

n = 253
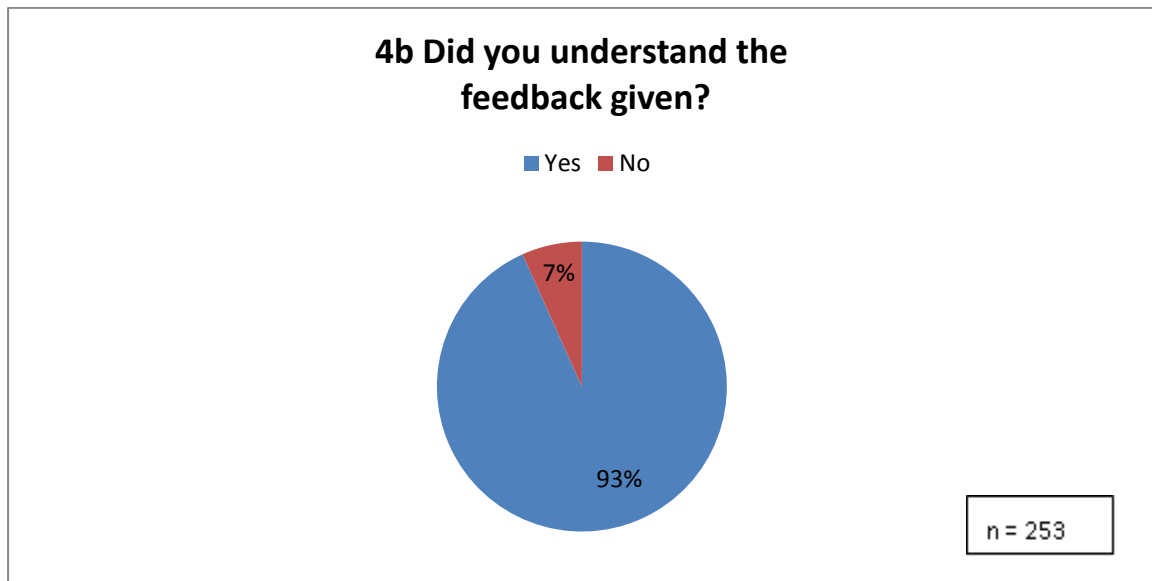
The majority of students appeared to understand the feedback given, but it is unclear if the students who did not understand their feedback, sought further guidance from staff.

Of the 17 students who stated that they did not understand the feedback given, three of these students had problems reading the feedback, it could therefore be construed that they did not fully understand the feedback because they could not interpret it. Of these three students, one received no feedback at all, one student went to see the tutor as she was still unsure how her low mark (43% ) was achieved. The staff also wrote unsupportive comments on the text for which he apologised when the student pointed this out. The remaining student said that the feedback highlighted only the negative points of her work and  gave no detail how it could have been improved.

With regards to quantity, the presentation and variety of staff feedback was diverse. It varied from a few comments in the small box on the assignment front sheet, to a few ticks in the text, work circled and indecipherable comments written at an angle on the students work. There was some evidence of a few staff giving unsupportive comments in the feedback. Some corrections of grammar, use of language and incorrect referencing were also evident on some students work.

Some staff did use feedback sheets and proformas and a few staff typed their feedback relating to the assessment criteria as well as making handwritten comments on the script.

**4c Do you think the feedback comments
made were fair?**

■ Yes ■ No

11%

89%

n = 243
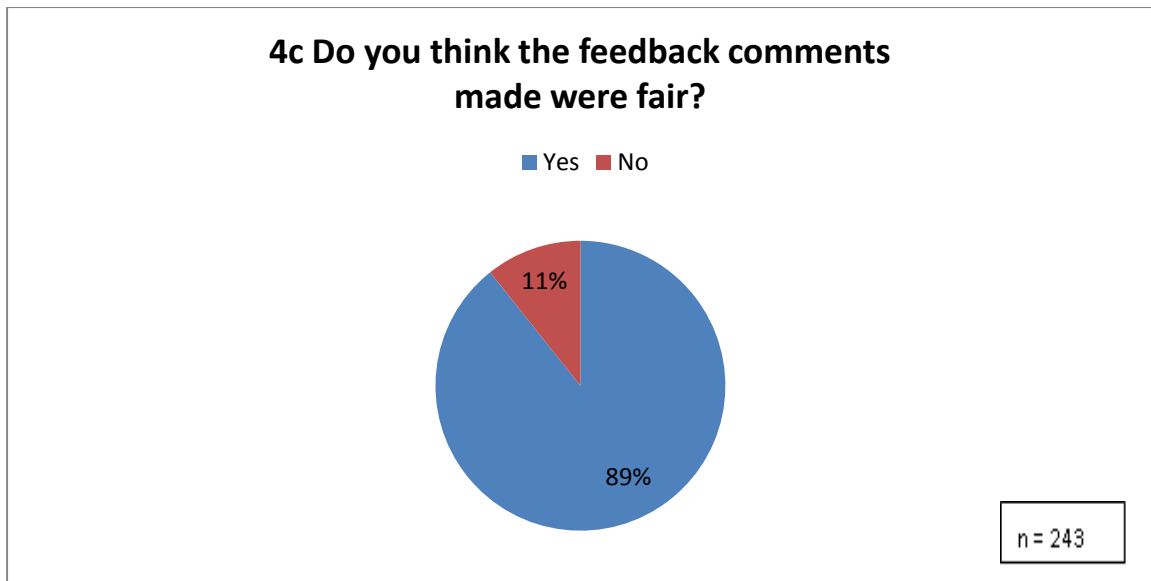
The majority of students considered that feedback was fair but some comments from students show that some individuals (11%) feel that the feedback and consequently, the mark was unfair as the assignment brief was unclear about what was expected from their work.
Below are some student comments:

- *'Can't read the comments'*
- *'Feedback was not particularly helpful'*
- *'Do not agree with all feedback as covering letters and CV's are different for each person. Learnt more appropriate language to use and will add more detail next time.'*

Some of the issues around the effectiveness of feedback arise not only from legibility but also the use of feedback language by staff, particularly with first year students.
Research by Weaver (2006)[21] showed that students have insufficient understanding of academic dialogue to interpret comments accurately. Students in the research study found much of the feedback too difficult to decipher and to understand. Weaver's work suggests that students are given advice at the start of their studies on how to understand and use feedback effectively.
It may therefore be appropriate to consider a short session on feedback to be included by Senior Tutors for first year students during the first term.

Weaver's study also looked at the students confidence in understanding common phrases used in feedback.

- Logical and coherent structure
- Key concepts identified
- Too descriptive
- More critical reflection needed
- Lacks application of theory
- Underpinning theory
- Superficial analysis

*100% confidence in this feedback*

*Declining confidence in the feedback statement*

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[21] Weaver, M.R. 2006. Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written response. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* Volume 31, Issue 3 June 2006, 379 - 394

Some of the comments from students regarding unfairness relate to lack of clarity regarding the marking criteria. A student in the research group commented on an awarded assignment mark of 70% and an 'excellent' written statement by staff, but this did not identify where the remaining 30% of the marks were lost.

There were some **excellent and innovative examples** of good practice of staff clearly indicating where marks were allocated for the different elements of the work, this was especially prevalent in the some of the laboratory work where it is perhaps easier to mark in separate sections and evaluate different skills (such a data interpretation). Pre-prepared feedback sheets outlining the assessment criteria were given by several staff and one staff member used the Likert scale to indicate feedback to students.

However, the majority of marked work collected for this study did not give any breakdown of where marks were allocated and was only presented the student with a final percentage mark.

Question 6 asked if the students understood how the marks were allocated for their work.
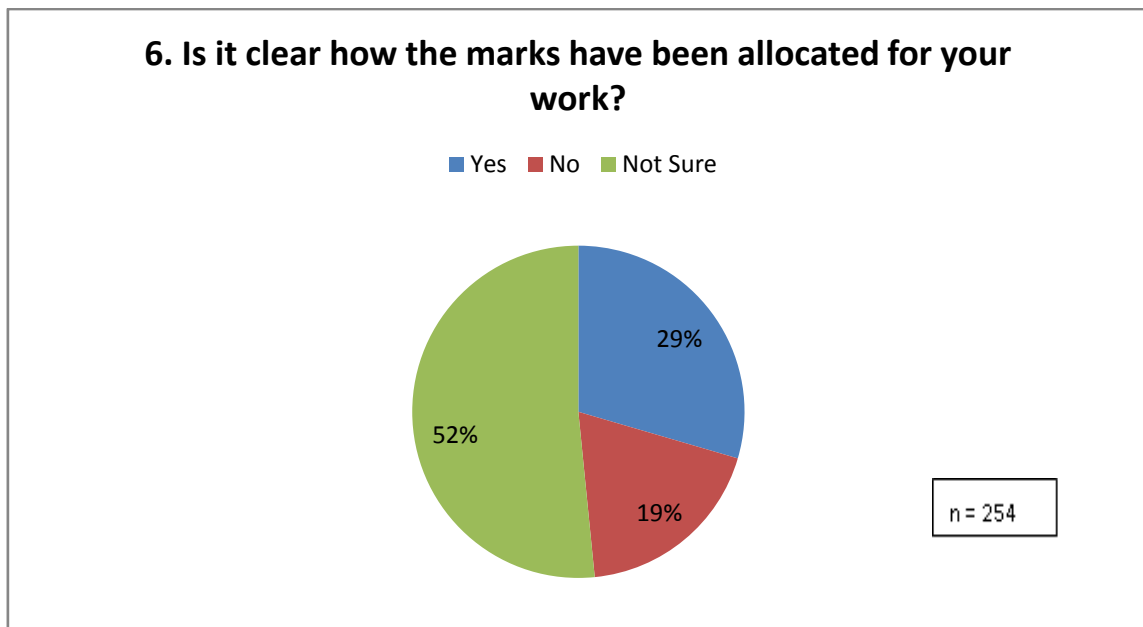


From the results, it appears than less than 30% of the students questioned in the study, fully understood how the mark or grade was achieved, with over half the students stating that they were unsure how the mark distribution were calculated. Whilst an analysis and verification of mark allocation is not a major focus of this research, it clearly has a bearing on the perceived fairness of feedback and its relevance to justify the mark given. It is therefore suggested that further research may be useful to evaluate the importance to students, of the clear mark allocation for all coursework.

Apart from the Academic Development module, this research is unaware of any detailed mark allocation that is given to students **before** they submit their work, which although would help guide the students, it could be seen by some academic staff as being overly prescriptive.

**4d Will your feedback help you with future work?**

■ Yes ■ No

33%

67%

n = 248
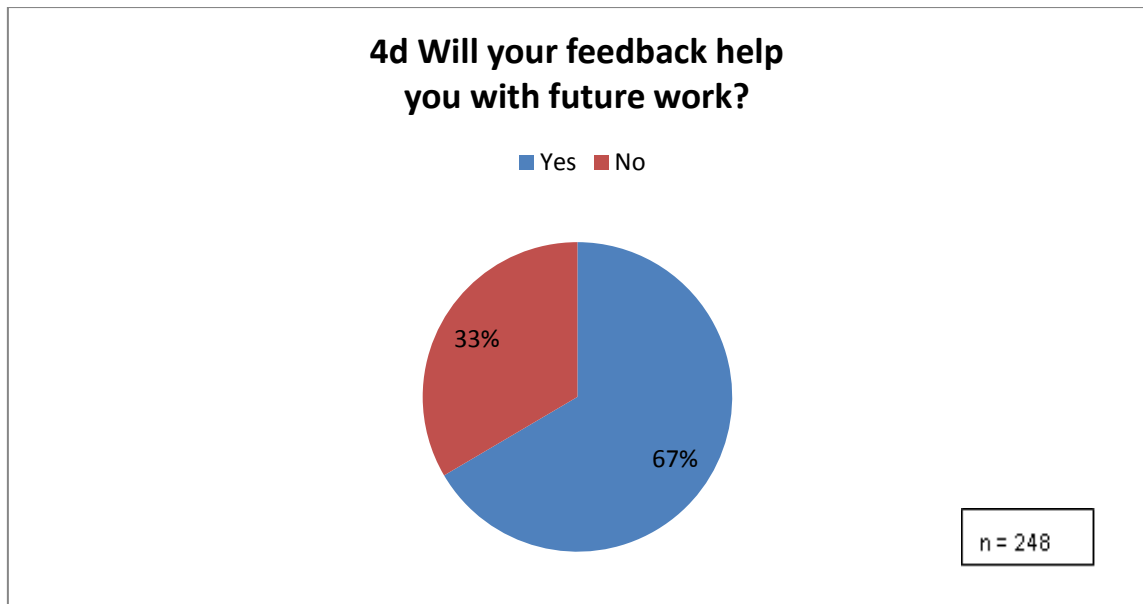
Feedback is only fully effective if it is used as a learning tool and allows the students to feed-forward and develop their learning skills and depth of knowledge in their subject.

From this research it is evident that only two thirds of students are using the feedback they receive to support their learning and future work. This may reflect several aspects of the feedback process, some which have already been discussed:

- *Unreadable and unintelligible feedback.*
- *Comments do not indicate the ways that the students could improve future work.*
- *Feedback may be very specific and topic related and less generic, so the learner cannot apply the feedback to feedforward.*

What is of some concern, is that several students (particularly first year students) are getting the same staff comments on nearly every assignment, often relating to incorrect referencing and report structure. Students either are unclear what they have to do to rectify the problem or are unwilling to access any support. It may also be possible that the student has not fully absorbed or understood the feedback and has therefore not appreciated the mark penalty for poor academic practice.

One student commented

*'If my mark is good then I do not take any notice of staff comments'*

Also noted, was that despite all assignment briefs stating that one of the marked criteria for formative assignments is that the work: *'Conforms to relevant guidelines on structure, data presentation and referencing (as detailed in Harper Adams' Guide to Report Writing and Guide to Citing References'*, several staff did not comment on incorrect referencing etc and students were not penalised for Poor Academic Practice[22], in line with college policy.

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[22] Academic Misconduct  Policy, Procedures and Guidance 2010: Available from HAUC intranet. Annex 5.24 . Guidance for students and tutors - academic misconduct and poor academic practice.

One student stated

> *'As no comments were made with references, structure and presentation I am assuming there are no problems with this area of my work'.*

Therefore confirmation, as well as correction is also important in the feedback given to students.

Comments made by students on how feedback could have better helped them (Question 8) include:

- *'I would have appreciated feedback that was clearly structured/broken down so that I could clearly see what improvements I would have to make in the future'.*
- *'Would be nice with more comments throughout, brief unclear'.*
- *'A little reasoning was provided for why I got the marks I got but very little advice to really help me improve my grades in the future'.*
- *'Very good how feedback is typed so very clear and easy to understand and refer back to'.*
- *'The feedback (although the mark was good) does give confidence and a positive message that the work is of a high standard'.*
- *'Fantastic feedback both written and verbally. Very good breakdown of marks and outlines where marks were lost'.*

Feedback may be regarded as some staff as a simple written explanation to justify the marks allocation, but is essential as Race (2001)[23] has shown in his extensive research and he has particularly looked at development of competence from feedback. Race's work also investigates some of the various strategies for giving useful, quick feedback to support the students learning ability. In response to a better understanding of how essential feedback is to the learning process and to develop further deeper learning and cognitive behaviour, Race developed the 'Ripples on the Pond' model (Figure 2).

The model is well explained by Race (2001) as the following:
"Imagine feedback bouncing back into the 'ripple' of learning. This keeps the ripple going, increases the intensity of the rippling, and deepens learning. If there were to be no feedback the ripple would tend to fade away and die out".

The learning would vanish and this clearly illustrates that several factors contribute simultaneously to successful learning.



Figure 2

### 4.3 *Focus group results*

Both the focus group meetings initially established, that all discussion taking place in the meeting would remain confidential and that students could not identify any staff by name. Students confirmed that the logistics of submitting their assignments and feedback sheets were satisfactory, although some were concerned that expected return dates for work were not being adhered to. This has been discussed previously in section 4.2.
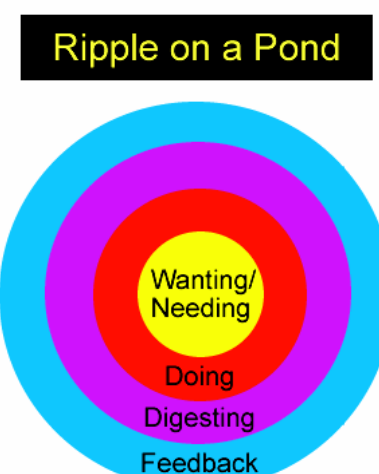
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[23] Race, P. 2001. Available from
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id432_using_feedback.pdf

**Positive comments**

- Constructive comments were for the preference for the presentation of feedback on a clear feedback template. Few students received this in advance of submission, but agreed that the criteria for assessment were identified in the assignment brief.
- Some staff issue general feedback to the whole class, either verbally, via email or on the VLE. This is in addition to the individual feedback. Students found this a useful to gauge their own progress and the addition of the range of marks/mean module mark, which allowed then to measure their performance against their peers.
- Some good examples of helpful oral feedback with individual students on previous submissions during practical laboratory sessions.
- There was general agreement that assignment briefs demonstrated the level of study required. i.e. certificate level more structured.
- Some students were grateful that tutors would check an outline of their work via e-mail

**Negative comments**

- Problems reading staff handwriting, suggestions for neater or typed feedback that could be easily read and understood. Very little feedback is typed.
  One student commented *'If students are expected to type – why not tutors*?'
- Variable response as to whether students would approach staff to decipher their handwriting, stating it depends on individual staff and being able to access them for support. Most staff indicated to students that they were available for any support if necessary.
- Students considered that if they doing well with their work, they need more than just ticks to confirm correct responses. Use of the word '*excellent'* but no indication by staff of how further marks could have been achieved. Tutors provided limited feedback on how students would achieve a mark > 70%.
- Some students had experienced a change in launch, submission or return dates for their assignments which has caused them inconvenience – clashing with other deadlines etc.
- A small number of students thought the assignment briefs were too broad and on occasions difficult to understand with contradictory statements or tasks and unsuitable language. It was raised that on occasions students are asked to produce an essay and then the marking criteria states that the piece of work must conform to the *HAUC Guide on Report Writing*, this led to loss of marks. There is some confusion also on whether the word allowance was a limit or a guide.
- Inconsistencies on what tutors want in terms of style i.e. font, margins etc. Some staff stricter on referencing correctly and will penalise students in line with the college policy of Poor Academic Practice.
- Two students expressed concern over return of assignments in class where others can see students marks/feedback and also inappropriate comments were made towards individuals in front of the class about their poor performance.

**4.4** *One to one interview results*

Individual interviews of 15 min duration were held with nine students who were randomly selected from the student research group. These students had not attended the focus group sessions.

The dialogue was open and honest and the remarks mainly reflected specific subject area issues for the students. Most of the remarks made, supported the comments from the focus groups but did allow interviewing staff to ask the students to expand on the points and reflect on their own experience.

**<u>Comments</u>**

- More feedback needed and the feedback was very variable between tutors. Little information was given in feedback on how performance could have been improved. Most feedback was about what was weak or incorrect in the submitted work.
- Feedback was not very personal. It could be clearer and more directed for most modules
- Evidence of some reflection by students on the effect of their written feedback and altering their behaviour appropriately e.g. One tutor made a comment in his feedback about the layout of his report and he subsequently altered future reports and thinks that his marks improved as a result.
- Work is returned sometimes late with feedback comments which would have helped to improve an assignment that has already been submitted.
- Some of the students interviewed liked the idea of more verbal feedback from staff.
- Marking scheme/pre-prepared format/proformas would be very helpful to see exactly how the marks have been allocated
- Most students had improved their work as a result of poor marks, irrespective of targeted feedback and had also sought some support from Learner Support and fellow students if necessary.
- One student commented on inconsistency and fairness of marking and feedback by different staff sharing the marking of a large cohort of students.
- One student commented that feedback given has improved since starting his study here at HAUC whilst another said there hadn't been much change in feedback in his 3 years at HAUC.
- One final year student stated he attended optional Learner Support workshops and 1:1 sessions to develop his academic skills in the first year. He believes that it was this support that was important to prepare him for the attention to detail required in HE which he did not get at FE level.
- There was a problem of critical thinking skills and evaluation skills required at final year level which are not covered as any part of academic development in the first or second years. Feedback from staff where information/ideas etc require evaluation and critical thinking is poorly understood by most students in the interviewees cohort.

**5.0 Impact of feedback on the students**

It is evident from some of the research in this project that most students have developed competence through supportive, effective feedback. The smaller size and more focused education at Harper Adams University College, could explain the research results for the students showing a greater response to feedforward and improve their skills compared to those in other research studies.

As a small institution and relatively smaller class sizes compared to larger pre-1992 HEIs, allows students to access staff more readily for support.

Major issues for the students seem to be illegibility of the feedback, timeliness and the clarification in the allocation of marks. Students who have responded to feedback and developed further their learning skills to feedforward, have shown an educational progression and developing intellectual maturity throughout the year. However, it was noted that clearly performance on some module reflects the students confidence, competence and preference for certain topic areas.
Students approach to staff for clarification of feedback and support is variable and depends on the staff students relationship as well as the availability of staff.
Some students are more focussed on their grades when work is returned, and if high enough will disregard feedback accordingly, especially if it was very subject related and cannot be used for other work. However, as expressed in section 4.2 question 4d, there is concern that some first year students who are repeatedly getting staff feedback about their report writing skills, insufficient detail /poor research material and/or incorrect referencing and not responding to find the solution to improve or get the support necessary.

**6.0 Impact of feedback for teaching staff**

Discussion with teaching colleagues has highlighted the pressure staff are under to mark and provide effective feedback particularly to large groups of students in a relatively short period of time. HAUC return time for marked work is given as 4 weeks, unless staff specify that it will be longer for the larger groups of students. Some staff also consider that spending time writing feedback is often wasted as it is not read, absorbed or acted on by the students. There is excellent evidence of several staff using proformas to complete feedback for the students but there is little evidence that this is given before work is submitted to help direct students work. There is also little evidence to how the mark/grade is achieved and few feedback sheets show the marking criteria.

Many staff, although aware of poor handwriting will explain to students that they can come and get the feedback translated if necessary, although they may be unaware that the less motivated or unsure students find this approach difficult and it is very much dependent on personal relationships. Students may also be unable to approach staff to get information on how they could improve their work if it is not given in the feedback. Staff should not be giving students feedback if it is not legible and comprehendible.

If students only submit one assessment for a tutor, then that tutor does not see any evidence of the effect of their feedback. It is clear that where there are several assignments e.g. lab reports/practicals, that the effective feedback from staff has motivated and improved the learning skills of students.

**7.0 Guidance for students and staff at Harper Adams University College**

There is currently no guidance on feedback given to either staff or students at HAUC.

It is clear from this research that students, when entering HE have a limited knowledge of what to expect from feedback on their work and what to do about it. This information could be included in the course handbook and covered as part Senior Tutor sessions in the first term, as it is an essential part of the student's educational development at university. It is important also for staff to understand how to give effective feedback and be clearer in the setting of assignment briefs and to give clarification of the marking criteria.

Many Universities already have this information for students and staff . The Universities of Sheffield, Bath, Edinburgh, Reading, Leeds Metropolitan and St Andrews all have examples of good practice.

An example of the feed forward advice given to staff at Reading University is given in Appendix C and also Appendix D : Feedback and Assessment at the University of Edinburgh.

**As an example, the University of St Andrews outlines the following for staff**

- ✓ There should be an explicit relationship between **feedback, assessment criteria and intended learning outcomes**.
- ✓ Feedback should involve mutual respect between staff and students and **dialogue** rather than monologue. The nature and depth of this dialogue will develop over time: effective feedback must be tailored to the level of study.
- ✓ **Staff should expect students** to understand that they have multiple pressures on their time and that they cannot deliver unrealistic volumes of feedback; and staff should be able to expect that students will collect their feedback and digest it appropriately.
- ✓ **Students should expect staff** to give time to the provision of feedback, and should be able to expect that feedback will reinforce what has been good in their work, help correct what has not been good, and feed forward into future work.
- ✓ **Generic feedback** can be of significant value, in that it can allow students to contextualize their performance in relation to that of others. However, students typically express a legitimate desire for **individually tailored feedback**.
- ✓ Feedback should be **understandable** – couched in plain English or in specialist terminology appropriate to the level and discipline; **credible** – making realistic assumptions about students' performance; **sufficiently detailed**; **legible**; constructed in a way that **allows for improvement** in the next assignment; and **constructive.**

Outcomes from the Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP)[24] project, have identified the following useful advice to staff with regards to giving effective feedback

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[24] Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP) 2007. Available from http://www.reap.ac.uk/index.html

- Show students examples of feedback comments given to previous students undertaking an assignment and discuss the meaning of the comments and how they might be used to improve performance
- Give feedback before marks to encourage students to concentre on the feedback first
- Ask students to formulate their own marks based on the feedback they receive and discuss any variance
- Make feedback comments readable and interesting – feedback comment banks can help to make provision of more detailed comments an efficient process but personalisation of comments is important too
- Encourage students to *request* the feedback they most value – for example, ask them to submit three questions that you can answer either individually or collate for the class and develop a 'frequently-asked questions' website or message-board
- Schedule time, perhaps in tutorials, for students to share feedback on their work and discuss common difficulties or successes
- Remember that feedback has a motivational impact on students – don't just concentrate on areas that require improvement, but comment on good aspects of the work and explain why you were impressed. Take care over the words you use.

**8.0 Impact on the researcher's development**

This research has been an interesting and challenging project. The logistics in collecting and collating the information from such large number of submitted assignments has been at times, complex.

The varied nature of the style and delivery of the staff feedback has been very enlightening and excellent examples of innovative and interesting feedback sheets and templates have been identified.

Whilst it would have been useful to have a larger and wider sample group of students for this research, the large number of submitted assignments and their feedback has been significant, given the timescale.

As a lecturer, Nicky Hunter has for some years, changed from her illegible handwriting on feedback to presenting all feedback on a typed sheet for which the students have been given an uncompleted copy for guidance with the assignment brief. The feedback from the students has been positive and amendments made following their comments. In order to avoid frequently repeating the same comments to students, a bank of comments is used for the feedback but personalised where necessary. This has also been valuable as a permanent record of feedback which can be used for other assignments on other modules. On reflection of the students comments in this research, regarding the clarification of marking of work, this researcher will consider the future use of marking criteria also on the feedback sheet given with the assignment brief.

The focus groups and interview sessions were very interesting and raised many other points not given by the students in their feedback of their own assignments.

On the whole it was gratifying that so many students are satisfied with the feedback given, once they understood what it said and how they found it effective.

**With regards to the impact on Learner Support**, this research has reinforced the importance to Jane Hill about clear and constructive feedback for students with a SpLD. Recent research by Burden[25] (2005) indicated confidence and self- esteem are key factors in determining how students manage their SpLDs. It is essential that feedback is written in a motivational and constructive manner as students with low self- esteem are more likely to interpret feedback in a less positive manner. The Learner Support Team can therefore play a key role in helping students interpret their feedback to feed forward and also encourage students to speak to their tutor for further clarification.

Comments in the focus groups and individual interviews acted as a very valuable reminder when working with students on a one to one basis of the impact of feedback in terms of boosting confidence or reinforcing poor self-esteem.

The issue of illegible handwriting is of concern as some students, who may also have SpLDs, may be less likely to approach a tutor to seek clarification, if they are perhaps embarrassed about being 'put on the spot' about their work  . It also places a greater importance on any face to face discussion being handled sensitively and constructively by the tutor.

The importance of the section in The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy for Students with Disabilities and Guidance for Staff, Students and Applicants where it states students may indicate on their assignment they have a SpLD and would therefore welcome feedback on grammar and spelling has been highlighted. This has resulted in the Learner Support Team considering how to raise awareness of this option.

Overall, it was very encouraging and inspirational to see some excellent examples of feedback which were also good exemplars for supporting for students with SpLDs.

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[25] Burden, R. 2005. *Dyslexia and Self-concept: Seeking a Dyslexic Identity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

**9.0 Future Development Opportunities and Recommendations**

- ✓ It is imperative that HAUC develops a college wide policy on formative feedback for both staff and students. The expectations for students and staff need to be clearly outlined. It is also important to realise that the students are not passive recipients of assessment activities and feedback. If students are provided with useful, high-quality feedback that supports effective student learning, they can be motivated and feedforward and improve both the depth of their knowledge, understanding and advance their learning skills.

- ✓ It is inappropriate to suggest that staff follow any prescriptive feedback proformas but staff should be encouraged to develop their own subject and module specific structure for feedback.

- ✓ It is strongly suggested that staff consider typing student feedback and making this available for students on the VLE so it can be viewed off campus, when students may not have access to the written feedback. It has been shown by much of the research (including that published by Race in 2001[26]) that high quality **effective** feedback can be delivered to students without a negative impact on staff time.

- ✓ With emerging technology, it may be that staff can also give additional group and individual verbal feedback via the VLE but this should not be seen as a replacement for face to face meeting with students where the students can ask specific questions about their feedback.

- ✓ Future research in this area could also investigate the more detail analysis of the students understanding of assignment assessment criteria and marking allocation for formative assessments. Feedback from students in this research project has also indicated that a wider range of formative assessments format could be used and the range of assessment types across the University could be analysed. The range could be evaluated for their educational value and in addressing the needs of the wide variety of learning styles.

- ✓ To consider actively promoting the option outlined in the *Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy for Students with Disabilities and Guidance for Staff, Students and Applicants* which says 'Students may indicate on their assignment submission form that they have a Specific Learning Difficulty and that they would particularly welcome detailed and constructive feedback regarding structure, grammar and spelling. Students are encouraged to discuss this feedback with Learner Support Tutors to help them to develop their study and written communication skills.' This would also require raising awareness not only to students but also academic staff.

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[26] Race, P. 2001. Available from
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id432_using_feedback.pdf

**Introduction to the feedback research: Student questionnaire**

*Please answer the following questions and tick ( ✓ ) the appropriate boxes.*

***All information is confidential***

**Name:**

**Course:**                                                **Year:**

1. **My comments on feedback come from:**

School/FE College ☐     Other Universities I have attended ☐     Harper Adams ☐

2. **Have you found feedback useful to understand where you have gone wrong and where you can improve your work?**

Yes ☐          No ☐          Sometimes ☐

3. **What sort of feedback do you prefer?**

Written on the script ☐          Written on a pre-prepared feedback form ☐

Verbal feedback from the tutor ☐          A mixture of written and verbal feedback ☐

4. **In the past have you improved your work by using feedback?**

Yes ☐          No ☐          Sometimes ☐

5. **If you have experience of feedback, from the list below, what do you think are the important features of feedback that <u>motivate</u> and help you to improve your learning skills and the quality of your work?**
   **<u>Please rank 1 – 6 in order of importance</u>**

                                                                        **Rank**

- Quick feedback on an assignment before more work is handed in
- Understanding what the tutor has written about my work
- Not understanding the assignment brief at the start
- Writing or saying encouraging words that makes me feel  I can do better next time
- Breaking up the marks and feedback to show which sections of my work were good or poor
- Detailed information of where marks were allocated and what the marking criteria are

Any other comments you want to make?

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6. **Do you have any learning support needs?          Yes/No**

**If yes, please specify………………………………………………………………………..**

Please sign below to indicate your willingness to take part in this Harper Adams University College research.

***<u>Please note that all student and staff names and the names of modules will remain anonymous.</u>***

Signature:    ………………………………….

Date:………………………………….

*All information is confidential*

## Student response to assignment feedback

*Please answer the following questions and tick ( ✓ ) the appropriate boxes.*

**Name...................................................................................................**

**Course &Year .....................................................................................**

**Module title and code.........................................................................**

1. **Did you understand from the assignment brief exactly what you had to do for your assignment?**

   Yes ☐          No ☐          Not sure ☐

2. **Did you go to staff for help with your assignment?**

   Yes ☐          No ☐

3. **Did you go to Learner Support staff for help?**

   Yes ☐          No ☐

4. **Was the feedback on your assignment :**

| | Yes ✓ | No ✓ |
|---|---|---|
| • Easy to read? | | |
| • Did you get verbal feedback? | | |
| • Do you think the comments made were fair? | | |
| • Did you understand what was written for you | | |
| • Will the feedback help you for your next assignment? | | |

5.  **If the feedback has helped you, please explain what you will do to improve further work ?**

..............................................................................................................................

..............................................................................................................................

..............................................................................................................................

6.  **Is it clear how the marks have been allocated for your work or the marking scheme that was used?**

Yes ☐          No ☐          Not sure ☐

7.  **In feedback from staff has any of the following been identified as a problem?**

|  | Yes ✓ | No ✓ |
|---|---|---|
| • Referencing correctly |  |  |
| • Report structure |  |  |
| • Organising material |  |  |
| • Information has been omitted |  |  |
| • Insufficient detail for the level of work |  |  |
| • Poor presentation |  |  |

8.  **Suggestions of how this particular feedback really helped you or could have helped you better.**

..............................................................................................................................

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*Thank you for completing this form. Please submit this form and your assignment, including any tutor feedback to AC3 in the Aspire Centre and ensure you return to collect your assignment after 7 days.*

**Appendix C: Advice to staff on Feedback and Feed Forward: University of Reading**

**What is high-quality feedback?**

- Write a brief summary of your view of the assignment.

- Balance positive and negative comments.

- Use constructive criticism to provide positive suggestions for improvement.

- Ask questions that encourage reflection about the work.

- Explain all your comments.

- Suggest follow-up work and comments.

- Suggest specific ways to improve the assignment.

- Explain the mark or the grade and explain why it is not better or worse.

- Offer help with specific problems.

- Offer opportunity to discuss the assignment and your comments.

Adapted from:-

Gibbs, G & Habeshaw, T. (1989) *Preparing to teach: An introduction to effective teaching in higher education.* Technical and Education Services Ltd.

**Tips on providing 'Feed Forward' guidance**

"Feed Forward" is a concept that aims to provide students with 'pointers' to support them in preparing for a particular assignment before they have to submit it. These pointers clearly define what is expected of them in their work.
Some easy ways to introduce 'Feed Forward' guidance are to:-
- Show students the marking criteria.

- Help students to see exactly how assignments are marked by looking at examples of past assignments (good and bad) and applying the assessment criteria.

- Talk about the question/s being set so that students are clear about what is being asked of them.

- Have a class discussion about commonly made mistakes.

- Provide students with self-assessment sheets to complete before they submit their work. The self-assessment sheets can highlight important aspects of the assignment and marking criteria.

- During the assessment of assignments (essays, oral presentations, etc.) provide tips on how future assignments could be improved.

**http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/ipp/Issue3_DaiHounsell**

# Reshaping feedback and assessment

**Description**

Feedback is proving a hard nut to crack. Though there are some signs of an improving situation (and a welcome flurry of efforts to forge new approaches to communicating it), scores from the National Student Survey and other sources of evidence continue to remind us of the persistence of pressing student concerns about the adequacy of feedback on their progress and achievements. And like many Pro Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Principals with similar portfolios, it's my responsibility to lead efforts across my university to narrow the gap between current levels of student satisfaction with feedback and where we and our students would like them to be. In my own case, though, there's also a personal history to factor in, one of close encounters with feedback and learning in higher education, since it's been a long-standing research and development interest of mine. Whether that's a blessing or a curse is open to question, but it's the vantage-point from which I'll try to sketch out what I see as key strategic directions for enhancing feedback.*

**Clarity**

In all the recent debates and discussions about feedback I've been party to, inside and beyond my university, what's struck me most is how slippery an object feedback is. What it means, why it's important, how it's best given, who's best-placed to give it, where and when it's most effective — there's no single-stem answer to this question. Rather, there's a mixed bouquet of possibilities that vary depending on the subject area, the level of study, the task or activity concerned, the purposes for which the feedback is being offered, and the resources of time and effort that can be called upon in a given setting. If, then, we're to make real headway in bettering feedback,  an indispensable starting-point is greater collective clarity across our universities – amongst both staff and students – about the many hats which feedback can wear.  And that readiness to acknowledge feedback's inbuilt diversity also needs to underpin feedback policies and procedures, locally and institution-wide.

**Consistency**

Strategies that aim for greater consistency in feedback provision (and ideally, seek to set acceptable standards) are also crucial. Efforts in any university to raise the quality of feedback shouldn't just be focused on those departments or subject areas where student satisfaction scores are lowest, because what the NSS evidence paints isn't a landscape where stone walls neatly separate out excellent from poor providers. It's more a picture of provision which is very variable, within as well as between universities and subject areas. Indeed, although the NSS data doesn't stretch that far, I'd hazard a guess that if we were able to peer down a further level and  see the scores for individual lecturers, we'd also see a good deal of variability between members of staff, even where the overall score for their department or school was predominantly high or low. A key managerial and leadership challenge, therefore, would be to bring all provision up to a threshold that is both formally agreed and widely understood. Securing the former won't necessarily achieve the latter.

**Sharing good and emerging feedback practices**

With the notable exception of the Open University, the interchange of feedback in higher education is typically invisible and unmonitored. As a consequence, our diverse approaches to providing it are also largely outside of our current field of view. Even close neighbours (whether in nearby offices or cognate subjects) may know little about how it's done next door, with the consequence that good feedback practices aren't readily shared across a campus in a form that would add to our collective understanding of what can work well. We therefore need to devise ways of surfacing, recording and disseminating – across and beyond our institutions – instances of effective feedback.

That's all the more important because, fascinatingly, how, when and where feedback is being given is itself in the throes of transformation. One stimulus to change has been the spread of new technologies that can be used to pioneer less traditional means of providing feedback. These include clickers in lectures, podcast feedback, video commentaries on reports and scripts, automated feedback on practice answers to multiple-choice questions, and a variety of technological aids that enable tutors and lecturers to recycle as well as insert comments on word-processed assignments. That same technological shift has also brought new modes of communication – most excitingly wikis – that can transform not only the quality of students' learning within and from assignments, but also open up golden opportunities for ongoing feed-forward rather than post hoc feed-back.

**Support for enhancing**

Nor is it enough to spread good and emerging practices, however energetically. Our colleagues need time and opportunity to experiment with new possibilities, get to grips with unfamiliar software, techniques or equipment, brief their students on whatever new approach they may be trying out, and in due course evaluate its effectiveness. Some such support can doubtless be provided centrally, in two particular respects: assistance with trying out new technological aids to marking and feedback, and helping to put colleagues in touch with promising developments in enhancing feedback in other universities. In my own university, we've been developing a website to pursue the second of these**, and in the process it's brought home to us the sheer scale and spread across the subject range of innovations in feedback provision. That disciplinary dimension is crucial (and calls for localised as well as central support) because, as with assessment, there are signature practices in feedback — forms of feedback that are distinctive to specific subject areas and are interwoven with core disciplinary requirements and conventions.

**Revamping curricula and assessment**

Besides identifying ways of enhancing feedback within existing curricula, universities must also acknowledge the need for a more fundamental recrafting of degree programmes and course modules, focusing not just on building on richer opportunities for feedback but also on fine-tuning the interplay between how we assess and what we would like to students to learn.

At degree-programme level, that would mean exploring how feedback can both reflect and contribute to a progressive shift over the undergraduate years towards greater student responsibility for learning. At the level of the module or course unit, it would mean rethinking assignments and assessments that crowd towards the end of semesters and yield feedback which mostly comes too late to be educationally effective or useful to students. (Visitors from other planets might reasonably ask why, now that word-processing has made revising what's been written so much easier, we continue to give undergraduates feedback mainly on completed work rather

than drafts-in-progress). And across both programmes and course units, we should be making more enthusiastic use of feedback strategies that combine relatively low cost with high impact. These include wider use of peer and self-generated feedback; easier student access to exemplars that show what high-quality work looks like; introducing elective feedback (where the onus is on students when they submit a piece of work to indicate what they'd most like feedback on); and such proxies for conventional feedback as collaborative tasks, co-editing, and assignments which, like oral and poster presentations, put students' work on open display.

Overall, an ambitious strategic agenda? Without a doubt, but we can't duck the challenge of moulding feedback that's fit for the needs and circumstances of 21st-century higher education.