Student Feedback
Project 2007:
Report of findings

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Student Feedback Project 2007: findings

The report is based on responses to questionnaires from 166 students in Humanities Languages and Social Sciences and Art Media and Design, a sample of which was then interviewed in further depth. The literature indicates students often find feedback difficult to understand and therefore difficult to use. It has been suggested in the literature that this may be a result of academics using feedback to achieve purposes associated with both formative and summative assessment. The report considers a range of student opinion and proposes that consideration be given to developing the ability of students to use feedback as part of the normal teaching activity.

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of the UWE Student Feedback Project (which ran March to June, 2007). The project was set up to investigate HLSS and AMD students’ expectations, perceptions and use of tutor feedback, using questionnaires, focus groups and one-to-one interviews. This project builds on findings from previous research on students’ transition from 6th form/college to university, the recommendations and successful outcomes of which are listed in Appendix One.¹

Student dissatisfaction with feedback from lecturers has been highlighted as a problem across the University. The National Student Survey showed this to be the part of their experience with which students were most dissatisfied (www.tqi.ac.uk). Similarly the University’s Marketing and Communications Department survey of recent graduates (2005) highlighted a significant gap between levels of perceived importance and levels of satisfaction, regarding student feedback.² It had also become clear from the student satisfaction surveys that students regard the rapid return of useable feedback to be important. However anecdotal evidence from teaching staff indicated that students did not necessarily appear to act on the feedback they were given and in some cases did not even go to the trouble of retrieving marked assignments from tutors. Students also commented in local satisfaction surveys that they felt it took too long to receive written feedback.

Much current literature on this topic engages with the processes of giving feedback, thus tending to focus on lecturers/tutors themselves. This paper broadens the field, focusing on students talking about feedback in their own words: what they understand by feedback, how useful it is to them, what they expect and want from it, what they find helpful and unhelpful and so on.

In concluding, we will be addressing the ways in which the framework of the assignment system itself reinforces ‘strategic’ or ‘superficial’ learning behaviours, and consider other ways in which students’ independence and proactivity in learning and working for assignments can be encouraged and nurtured.

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¹ Student Transition Report 2006 available from kate.brooks@uwe.ac.uk or kieran.kelly@uwe.ac.uk

² Available from Marketing and Communications
2. Literature Review and Discussion

A survey of the literature (primarily conducted using Google Scholar) indicated that there is in existence a body of material on the subject of feedback to students, and related fields such as assessment practice, however little research had been conducted among students themselves. It may be that the assumption that feedback is necessary but little attention is paid to what it is actually for. Undoubtedly lecturers hope that it will help students to improve their future work. It also appears to serve the purpose of justifying the mark given for the piece of assessed work. This dichotomy does of course lie at the heart of Higher Education; HE is intended partly to develop the learner and partly to certify that the student has certain benchmarked skills (QAA). The usual way to overcome this difficulty has been to separate out formative and summative assessment. This had not been a problem in the traditional university. The formative essay followed by the first year and final year examinations has been a widely used format. In contrast in the new (post-1992) universities the model of module based credit accumulation had tended towards the use of continuous assessment. Many marking schemes therefore include every assessed piece of work submitted after the first year in the final degree grading. Major reviews of the literature on formative assessment have been undertaken most recently by Black and Williams (1998) who took as their base-line two substantial review articles, one by Natriello (1987) and the other by Crooks (1988). It is impossible in the space available to consider these reviews in any detail (Black and Williams reviewed 681 articles). However it should be noted that they consider not only those articles that review techniques of assessment and review but also many that discuss the philosophical, social and psychological underpinnings of pedagogy. In the field of feedback, Black and Williams’ review highlighted those articles that indicated that feedback was most beneficial when teachers concentrated on the task rather than the student and highlighted the impact of supportive and positive encouragement.

William and Black discussed this problem with some sophistication with reference to the national curriculum in schools. (Williams and Black 1996) In their conclusion they found themselves rather stumped primarily because of the external assessment schemes that dominate secondary education. It is worth noting that in HE where assessment is largely designed by academics who both teach and assess that the ‘continuum’ of assessment, i.e. the integration of assessment, that Williams and Black suggest may actually be practicable. An interesting example of such an approach in the Humanities is given in the teaching of mediaeval literature (Smyth 2004). Smyth describes a course wherein the differences between formative and summative assessment are made clear to students. In consequence the different sorts of critical evaluation and summative judgement associated with formative and summative assessment respectively are taught as part of the course. Such an approach to assessment may become more important as the cohort of traditionally prepared students becomes a minority in the face of mass higher education. It is therefore worth paying some attention to the larger issues for a moment, in particular the kinds of students who enter university and the attitudes to education that they bring with them.

Our previous work on transition suggested that students sought models of how to be a student and that they attuned themselves to a model constructed from perceptions of the University, institutional context, student opinion and their own experience and expectations. This is not the place to explore alternatives to the current model of the University, however the increase in participation rates in Higher Education have drawn in students who might not previously have participated in HE. However it appears that the expansion of HE has not brought in students from manual working class backgrounds where applications from the lowest socio-economic groups remain at around 25% (The Guardian 12 June 2007). Rather it has drawn in a layer of young people who might previously have entered white collar work business and the public sector and relied on internal training to develop their careers. As the ‘certification’ role of HE has increased so ‘learning for learning’s sake’, particularly in the Arts and Humanities, has come into
even greater tension with the role of preparation for work and certification in general. The development of mass HE, albeit of the character described above, has been accompanied by a considerable development of ideas in teaching drawing on a vast range of philosophical and pedagogic traditions.

As Haggis (2006) has pointed out the institutional structures of British Universities tend to support a directional transmission of knowledge from the lecturer to the student rather than a shared investigation and resolution of problems. Terrenzini (1999) has argued something similar in the US case. It should not be thought that the difficulties in academic feedback to undergraduates are exclusively a problem for new universities. Even in the ‘Old Universities’ the pressure to complete research means that many students are unlikely to receive an informal tutorial with an expert in their field. Rather feedback is also likely to be written and may even be provided by a PhD student. Bearing these factors in mind our attention turns to feedback itself.

The primary concerns of the literature on feedback include two areas of interest (which are often commented upon in the same paper or project). One, the contradictory, difficult, obscure and sometimes simply unreadable nature of feedback provided by teachers and, two, the use, or lack of use, made of feedback by students. It is perhaps actually most important to take the latter first, in that if students do not use feedback, then no matter how much it is provided or demanded then there is no point in producing it. The most recent review of the literature on feedback has been undertaken as part of an Higher Education Academy funded FDTL5 project (Millar 2005). The project has yet to report but the literature review offers a conclusion that both the institutional context and the views of academics on how students learn are crucial aspects of the process.

In the sample researched by Higgins et al (2002) the principal conclusion was that students wanted to use feedback but could not always make sense of it. However it should be noted that for example in Holmes and Smith (Holmes and Smith 2003) the student difficulty was primarily with a lack of comment, indecipherable comment and overly negative comment (it is possible that the local practices were particularly poor). McCune (McCune 2004) reported even more negatively that feedback to a group of first-year psychology students had no impact whatsoever on the conceptualisations that they were supposed to develop through essay writing and feedback. However it proved difficult for the author to come to any deeper conclusion in view of the small sample.

In an interesting article Orrell (2006: 442) has argued that the purpose of grading essays dominates the real process of assisting students to improve their essay-writing. It worth noting that in turn this aspect of feedback becomes an expectation among students (Brown 2007)

“At the end of the assessment process, once assessors had decided on a grade, it was common practice for them to provide a summary explanation, in writing, regarding the reason for the grade assigned. This is what the academics probably referred to as ‘giving feedback’.” (Orrell 2006: 453).

So markers end up justifying their marks rather than helping students to improve. Orrell also points out that

‘Participants in this study suggested that one of the most valuable purposes of assessment was to give students feedback on their achievements. In practice, academics

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3 The FDTL Project “Engaging Students with Assessment Feedback” was underway at the time of writing.
were observed to substitute reading and thinking about students’ texts with writing on and editing students’ texts.’ (Orrell 2006: 453)

The ‘new literacy’s’ approach adopted by Lea and Street (1998) attempts to provide a solution to this problem by paying attention to the social situation of both the tutor and the student. It could be said that this is an attempt to overcome the problems identified by Haggis in that the discourses employed by higher education lecturers are not those employed by many of their students except perhaps in a very small number of elite institutions and perhaps not even there.

A fairly fundamental question has been addressed by Higgins et al (Higgins et al 2002: 62) who go so far as to ask if there is any point in providing written feedback, i.e. will it actually support student learning? Based on a small sample they offer the tentative view that it has potential. However they argue;

- It must be timely, interim feedback on plans might be beneficial.
- Misconceptions need to be explained and suggests made for improvement.
- Critical skills are more important than editing the text.
- It must be provided in a language students understand not in a language appropriate to academics.

It is also important to note that inappropriate feedback can actually be unhelpful, particularly by lowering self esteem when students find they cannot understand the feedback they have been given. Hyland (2003) points to this in work on students learning a second language. It is of course possible that the very particular personal investment in language can mean negative comments impact particularly strongly on student feelings of self-worth and indeed Taras came to very similar conclusions when looking at translation students. Mutch and Ivanic et al make similar comments on a more diverse sample. (Taras 2003, Mutch 2003, Ivanic et al 2000)

Overall then it can be seen that the prospect of asking students about their experiences of and desires for, feedback offered a complex set of issues to explore. On the one hand, the need for clear, unambiguous feedback, easy to read and easy to act upon appears to be a foregone conclusion. On the other appreciating feedback as something to be processed rather than the correct answer to be learnt raises additional demands on teachers and students. In other words, assuming that academics can write clearly, what is it that students want to read? We therefore now move on to consider a methodology that might enable us to address the issue.

3. Methodology

Methodology

This study draws on our previous project’s methodology; a more detailed account of these qualitative methods can be found in the Student Transition Report (Brooks and Kelly 2006).4

4 See footnote [1]
Briefly, our approach consisted of three stages:

(i) A review of relevant literature and current studies
(ii) Approx 550 students were asked to complete a short questionnaire at the start of a number of lectures, and in and around the St Matthias SU Bar area, the Bower Ashton refectory and the Student Refectory at St Matthias. 166 responded and their responses are summarised in Section 3.
(iii) The questionnaire asked anyone interested in being interviewed further to give us their contact details (to stand the chance to win an iPod). 100 students did so, and each student was emailed. Of the 100 emailed, 15 replied, and 11 turned up for an interview, either on a one-to-one basis or in a small group of two or three.
(iv) A further few impromptu small group interviews occurred in a student café at Bower Ashton, where we interviewed a further 12 students bringing the total of interviews to 23. Each of these students also filled in a questionnaire, incorporated in the total of 166. Their responses to our questions are discussed in Section 4.

We would like to point out here that the decision to include Bower Ashton was to begin to explore the possible differences between students’ experiences of assessment feedback across different faculties and types of assignments. Ideally, we would have included all faculties and conducted interviews at Frenchay and Glenside: limitations of time and funding precluded this.
4. Issues Raised by Responses to Initial Questionnaires

Almost 550 students were asked to fill in a questionnaire (see Appendix Two) on assessment feedback. They were asked to comment on what kinds of feedback they had found most/least helpful and effective. We received a total of 166 responses and of the issues highlighted by students at each level are highlighted below.

Some issues highlighted by students at level 1, 2 and 3

- ‘Effective feedback involves being able to discuss work with a tutor’
- ‘Effective feedback forms include detailed information on how to improve’
- ‘One-to-one tutorials allow you to ask questions’
- ‘Effective feedback forms break the essay down into sections and comment on them (structure, grammar etc.)’
- ‘Ineffective feedback forms involve vague comments I don’t understand and/or handwritten notes on the essay’

Discussion

The dominant theme at all levels is the request for verbal feedback. Unsurprisingly, students at all levels also want detailed information on how they can improve. In the first year, there is a marked need to be able to ask questions – echoing the suggestions in current literature that students completing their first assignments need more clarification on their feedback. In particular it echoes Higgins et al’s (2002) observation, above, that students want feedback but are unsure how to understand and use it. There is a strong dislike of what they perceive to be ‘vague’ feedback which does not offer constructive advice on improvement, and a dislike of the handwritten notes in the margins of their work.

We also asked students what kinds of feedback they felt they needed and why. Of all 166 responses, just over half (56%) specifically stated they felt ‘one to one tutorials’ are or would be the most useful form of feedback. The following quotes exemplify the kinds of answers we received to this question.

‘A lot of feedback can be received in five minutes of talking than simply on a form’
‘Face to face with my tutor I get a real sense of what I am supposed to be doing’

‘I want the chance to ask questions or to air all my grievances...’

This suggests it’s not simply the opportunity to gain more information, although this is a significant motivation, but also to build a relationship with the tutor. This links in to our previous research on the transition experience which concluded that students feel they often lack a sense of belonging on their course, and can feel isolated and anonymous.

In terms of ‘effective feedback’ one student notably said that:

‘Feedback is effective when it encourages and recognises you’ve done well...it can be inspiring’.

Whilst most respondents agreed with this student, stating that feedback was generally helpful and clear, a number of respondents critiqued the feedback process, again exemplified below:
‘I don’t want feedback from a random tutor who doesn’t teach your seminar’

‘When it’s handwritten you can’t always read it and sometimes the phrasing is complicated’
(Film Studies/Drama 3rd yr)

‘Just getting an exam mark is useless in terms of improving and learning from it’

Thus it is suggested that what students broadly term ‘effective feedback’ can be defined as specific, detailed, positive, clearly stated and constructive.

We could, of course, critique this initial summary as stating the obvious. But as tutors we have to ask ourselves, if this IS obvious, why do students – as suggested by this preliminary small sample and the current research discussed in Section Two – feel they don’t always get the kinds of feedback they perceive to be most useful? Is there a significant cultural clash between tutors’ and students’ perceptions of effective feedback? Do students want tutorials because they simply don’t know what to do or how to understand their feedback? As we have pointed out, anecdotal evidence suggests that whilst students say they want tutorials, the vast majority do not turn up to assignment tutorials (commonly offered by the tutor before assignment deadlines) and the vast majority do not come to see tutors during their office hours. Is asking for more tutorials more an indication of wanting to feel more connected to Uni in general, but not knowing how to go about it?

In attempting to answer these questions, we carried out some more in-depth interviews, as described in Section One. Recruitment has been difficult, with only 23 students interviewed out of a potential 166 replies, and a number of students simply not turning up for arranged interview times. Whilst frustrating, this could be read as indicative of how students can consider feedback irrelevant—something to be got and then forgotten, or ignored in favour of simply getting the mark online. Possibly, those who don’t use or don’t know how to use feedback, would not be motivated to actually make time to talk to a possibly unknown person about it. Subsequently, our respondents discussed in Section Four could be described as motivated students who use feedback effectively.

5. Students in Their Own Words.

23 students interviewed: 10 x level 1, 5 x level 2, 8 x level 3. (11 from Cultural Studies and 12 from Art Media and Design

Students talk is categorised here under three broad themes:

1. Initial expectations of feedback
2. The assessment system
3. The student-tutor relationship

Although these categories broadly correspond to the questions we asked, there was a degree of spontaneous chat, so these categories reflect more accurately the students’ own concerns rather than directly reflecting our question schedule (which can be found in Appendix Three). Each begins with examples of students’ own words, which best sum up the key themes within that category, as well as bring the research ‘to life’ in a way that statistical charts and tables can never quite manage.
1. Initial Expectations

*Feedback [at 6th form] was much more tailored to you personally and the tutors had a good idea of your strengths and weaknesses, and there was enough time to talk. I know uni is about the transition to working independently but when there’s people around who know your work it helps.*

*I thought there’d be more time to discuss your work, it’s like it’s handed back very quickly in the seminar and then just forgotten about.*

*I was really surprised there isn’t a standardised system of feedback, that was the biggest surprise to me.*

Students’ attitude to feedback can be linked to their expectations of university life in general – again this is discussed more broadly in the Transition Project. Specifically here students’ talk correlates to current research which investigates the mismatch between students’ understanding of ‘work’ and what work involves at university level, and how that notion of work relates to the practices of academic study. This is taken up by Grisoni and Wilkinson who argue that this mismatch is part of a wider shift towards the commodification of higher education, as staff expect students to work independently whilst students ‘demand guidance to achieve results’ (Grisoni and Wilkinson 2005: 14). How this mismatch is managed is open to debate, but certainly more preparatory work at A level could be beneficial, alongside introductory workshops aimed at clarifying university expectations (Marland 2003, Smith and Hopkins 2005).

**Summary:** Currently, students could be better informed about the rationale and purposes of assignment feedback, in order to be better prepared for their first feedback sheets.

**Recommendations:** Building in ‘what to expect from feedback’ sessions at the start of modules could clarify the purpose of tutorials and feedback. The assessment process could be more transparent, for example, tutors could talk through the rationale behind the feedback sheet criteria and explain about second marking, as well as highlighting tutors’ availability to discuss work pre- and post-deadlines, in office hours.

2. The Assessment System

*I like the professional cover sheet, it makes me feel proud of my work, and that my work is important, it’s not just shoved in someone’s pg hole. I feel the system protects work, so I take pride in it.*

*I think essays should always be marked by your tutor even if they are anonymous so that they can give you feedback later. Otherwise feedback isn’t personal as you don’t know that person enough to have a rapport with them.*

Students generally saw the system as ‘fair’, avoiding favouritism and meaning that students ‘were not judged on previous work’. A minority of students disliked the anonymity, pointing out for example that: ‘second marking should prevent any bias…what is it about degree level work where it has to be anonymous? School and college work never was’ and that, ‘lecturers should be professional and not have favourites; anyway we only see them for an hour a week so no time for that kind of relationship to develop’. Generally however the anonymous marking system was
seen as positive, although this is a contrast to the more personalised feedback system at 6th form/college.® It could also be assumed that anonymous marking encourages a more systematic and less idiosyncratic marking although one student noted attempts to ‘personalise’ this:

‘Even if marking anonymously different tutors have different expectations so it’s worth building rapport with them to see where they’re coming from; I know students who’ll just hang around [staff offices] to see who they can see, because they just want as much info as possible so they’re calling in to whoever’s there or emailing all the time.

This taps into Haggis’ concerns that contemporary students adopt a strategic ‘give them what they want’ approach to assignments (Haggis 2005). That is, the kind of approach popularly derided as superficial and instrumental. However it can also be read as a positive sign that some students do proactively seek out and engage with their tutors and learn again proactively to gather information on assignments. Such an approach may not fit the ‘deep learning’ model of learning nor perhaps the more traditionalist model of student learning involving self directed library research, yet it could be seen as a valid and effective way of preparing for assignments, based perhaps on a broader and more ‘entrepreneurial’ model of learning. These ideas are discussed more fully in our conclusion.

One aspect of feedback which was uniformly critiqued was that of exam marking.

What’s the deal with exams?! You’re not allowed to get the papers back? So you sit in on a seminar all about how everyone did in the exam except you’ve no idea how you did really even though you’ve got the mark because you can’t remember what you did!

Clearly our current system of not giving papers back whilst giving more generalised feedback on content needs further thought, if we are to expect students to engage more fully and effectively with feedback in general. Currently, we are expecting students to recall almost perfectly, work they did at least three weeks previously, under pressure. Perhaps these sessions could be more usefully used as an opportunity for the student to reflect on exam skills in general, thus providing the kind of structured, in-module support students say they need (below).

Whilst we only have the words of 12 AMD students to go on, it is worth noting here that a common complaint with all those we did interview was the inconsistencies between tutors when it came to feedback:

A lot is left up to personal preference of the tutor…you can get marked down…because they don’t like your style

We’ve been complaining…’give us a straight answer, what do you want?!’

One student thought feedback should happen as part of a dialogue – ‘if we could discuss it that’d be good, we need to be able to sell ourselves after all’ Although it is acknowledged this is a difficult situation particular to students creating art works: how on earth do you assess fine art, anyway?!

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5 Similarly, the Transition Project found that whilst current literature on the topic cited lectures as the most unfamiliar and potentially alienating uni experience, the students we interviewed were in the main very positive about ‘interesting…useful’ lectures. This suggests that the current picture of ‘what students think about uni’ is more complex than currently acknowledged in the literature. More research is needed to explore and perhaps contest these current assumptions, particularly when those possibly erroneous assumptions go on to inform university practices.
**Summary:** In the main, the students we interviewed currently perceive the system to be professional and fair, and our findings start to suggest that what we could define as strategic learning is in fact creative and proactive information gathering. Most criticism was aimed at the current exam marking system, in which papers are routinely kept by the department and not handed back to the student.

**Recommendations:** We recommend a reconsideration of this system, particularly given how we encourage students to engage with self reflective learning. We would argue that the current system undermines this message.

### 3. The student-tutor relationship

The tutor-student relationship was discussed in four broad themes: making contact with tutors, one-to-one tutorials, listening to feedback from tutors, and getting feedback in seminars. Each is discussed separately, below.

**(a) Making contact**

*It can be intimidating going into their [tutors] space, you always feel like you’re imposing.*

*We pay fees but we have to work the lecturers to get the most out of them – go and see them, demand things etc., they don’t encourage us to do this.*

*Some lecturers are not often there or won’t read drafts as they say they’re ‘not paid to do so’ – this is unprofessional and slack, very bad, come on, you’re there to help us, you’re all paid the same and that’s your job, it’s just really bad, selfish.*

As we’ve discussed, students who are used to more contact at 6th form can find the ‘jump’ to independent learning too much of a challenge. We would argue it takes a degree of confidence to go into the tutor’s ‘space’ and ask for help, particularly of the lecturer who can be seen as the intimidating stranger at the front of the lecture theatre (*cf* Tinto 2000) referred to in one interview as ‘too academic’ to approach (although it must be noted here that this wasn’t the case with AMD tutors, whom at least one student thought should, ‘be less friendly and creative and give us more of a kick up the arse’). Mass education means the tutor-student relationship cannot be as personal as it possibly once was – tutors now have ever increasing numbers of students and can hardly be expected to build rapport with each and every one of them. Also, whilst there were a number of comments on tutors’ support and responsiveness, the last comment reveals that some students are unaware that some tutors – and commonly first year tutors (UCU Campaign Report 2007) – are hourly paid, which can cause misunderstandings.

**Summary:** Contacting one’s tutor individually can be a challenge to less confident students, whilst those who see their education in terms of entitlement feel they can *demand* communication.

**Recommendations:** Whilst communication is undeniably important we recommend further consideration on what *kinds* of communication are most effective and realistic to implement, rather than simply put the onus on the already over-stretched (and/or hourly paid) lecturer to encourage interaction. Supporting students with developing independent learning skills also means enabling them to realise when ‘demanding things’ is inappropriate.
(b) **One-to-one sessions**

One-to-ones are really good because you can get advice on how to improve grades even if you’re doing really well.

One to one discussions are really valuable because they motivate you more and engage you more emotionally; it’s easy to forget about cover sheet comments but if you had to go and talk to someone and they went over your work with you that are invaluable.

It should be built into the module that you go and see your tutor so that they’d know you, because your personal tutor won’t know your work, and some concerns are specific to your module anyway.

**Summary:** One-to-one tutorials can be labour intensive for the tutor – as we all know, the ’ten minute slot’ allotted to each student so that so many students can be seen per hour, inevitably overruns. Workshops on what to expect from feedback, and what to do about it afterwards, could go some way to alleviating this problem, and avoid tutors repeatedly having to explain exactly what plagiarism is, for example, to individual students.

**Recommendations:** We need to get a balance between the times when personal discussions are necessary (e.g. personal issues, plagiarism, failing) and the issues which could be more usefully discussed in group tutorials. As we’ll go on to argue, such group tutorials could include peer reviewing, which may enhance a sense of belonging as well as encouraging a more self-reflective approach to work and learning.

(c) **Listening to feedback**

When I go and see the tutor and talk through what they’ve written, then it all seems obvious and that’s reassuring because often they say what I thought about the essay anyway and that combined with a bit of encouragement is better than just seeing it written down on the paper.

10 mins is not enough time because since the tutor marked anonymously they can’t remember and you have to explain the essay before you get to your question.

Some people just don’t want to go and talk to the tutor if they’ve done badly because they think the tutor will tell them off.

If students don’t know what to do with feedback – summed up by the student who admitted she carefully filed her feedback forms, ‘but I don’t really read them’, then a verbal discussion of the rationale for the mark and what the tutor recommends for the future is invaluable. Indeed, one student went so far as to say that (as course rep) he’d seen that

’some students who’ve had bad marks ... take it badly, and just go off ... and I think 5-10 minutes with a tutor...a few words of encouragement face-to-face can make all the difference between dropping out and staying’

Some students can feel isolated and bewildered, and lack the confidence to build a rapport with their tutors. These feelings can be exacerbated by an anonymous marking system, and a seemingly negative and critical feedback sheet. Given that retention is a key issue then it does seem as if some personal contact, albeit minimal, can be vital. But again, we do need to consider
if a tutor of a module attended by a high number of students can realistically offer both pre-and post deadline tutorials, and how – if at all- we can encourage those about to ‘just go off’ to come and see the relevant member of staff.

**Summary:** Helping students does not necessarily mean more communication with the tutor (adding to their existing workloads) but clarifying when and what kinds of communications are appropriate. Tutors may also need to consider what role feedback plays in student retention.

**Recommendations:** In addition to encouraging students to learn when it is appropriate to ask for support (and what kinds of support it is appropriate to ask for), we also need to examine the role feedback may play in students deciding to ‘drop out’ of their course. How we might go about this is further discussed in the final section of this report.

( d ) **Getting feedback in seminars**

One way we could be said to be moving towards this ideal of students possibly working together to foster self reflective learning, is in the processes of seminar feedback:

> It’s good when they hand back essays in a seminar and then say some general things because then you are getting feedback but it’s more anonymous, like if they say ‘don’t use Wikipedia’ and you know you did, but it’s not like they are just telling you directly which could be a bit embarrassing.

> I like the general talk after work’s been handed back because I like to know about the process of doing work.

> If we were told the range of marks you’d know where you stood in relation to everyone else so general feedback is very helpful.

However it must be noted that there were critics of the tutor giving ‘group feedback’:

> When tutors say well most of you did this that isn’t any help to me.

> I sit there thinking, this doesn’t apply to me when tutors give general feedback, because you haven’t had a chance to look at your essay properly.

Interestingly, the AMD students were much more positive about group feedback, although their experiences of it were different to CMS students, as their ‘group feedback’ involved peer feedback as well as that from the tutor. This was seen as very useful:

> You get constructive criticism from similar minds.

Whilst this type of feedback lends itself more readily to visual art work assessments, the idea of peer reviews could translate to essays and exams, enabling students to share ideas and mutual support, and to learn from each other.

**Summary:** Perhaps other faculties can look to the AMD model of constructive, shared advice as an example of possible good practice in enhancing students’ feeling of belonging, of enabling them to share experiences and allow them mutually supportive space to reflect on their learning. This appears to support Ballinger’s argument that seminars generate confidence and a feeling of belonging, which in turn fosters co-operation between students, generating ‘a sense of we’re in it together” (Ballinger 2002: 105).
**Recommendations:** Offer opportunities for constructive self reflection with others within a module. For example, we could reconsider the role of the tutor in these sessions. Rather than provide an overall summary of ‘how you’ve all done’ in seminars, which is not as useful in encouraging self reflective learning, a tutor could facilitate more of a ‘self help’ group session, post-feedback.

### 4. Getting Feedback on Essays

Typed feedback is good, it avoids misunderstanding and confusion, and is usually succinct and relevant and I like to get it back and read what is said and how to improve.

The most effective feedback is a typed out sheet where it tell you what you’ve done well and what to build on; it’s a straight forward structure and gives you a straight forward response to your work.

Feedback on referencing where it was shown I lost marks was really useful – I won’t do that again!

Students generally found feedback sheets useful and effective. Given the general satisfaction with the ‘professionalism’ of the anonymous marking system, it seems only right that feedback should be equally systematic and standardised as typed forms. Students who said they used feedback sheets effectively described the following ways they did so:

- I always look at feedback sheets especially just before I hand work in to check I’m not doing the same mistakes, I keep the comments in front of me as I plan and write up the next piece of work to make sure I stay on track.

- I always use feedback; this is what you’re paying for! I feel like I’m getting money’s worth if the feedback is good at pointing out how to improve.

Students’ critical comments concerning the feedback form system are exemplified below:

- Sometimes you get a vague handwritten comment like ‘expand on this’ – well what does that mean, if I knew I would have done! Identifying the problems isn’t the same as helping you solve them.

- Sometimes the comments don’t connect with the marks – you can get really good mark but lots of negative comments; sometimes they can be too negative which is depressing.

- We type essays so we should get typed feedback – a few scribbles and a paragraph at the end isn’t good enough, you can’t always understand what they say.

The notion that tutors give feedback and students pay for that feedback is an interesting one, which needs further discussion elsewhere.⁶

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⁶ For further discussion on the so-called commodification of university learning, see for example Furedi, (2003) and Haggis (2006).
What are we as tutors doing when we write comments on feedback sheets? Are we reviewing the specific piece of work and evaluating its strengths and weaknesses? Is it clear to the student why this is relevant to their next piece of work? Are we giving general advice on how to improve, to support their general progress? Or are we justifying the mark? Whilst traditionally tutors see the learning process as one of debate and challenge, students, it is argued, increasingly demand support in order to get results. Thus the discursive mode of ‘critique’ when it comes to giving feedback, and students’ lack of awareness of that discursive mode, are perhaps key to this mismatch - a point which is taken up in our final section.

Finally, another significant aspect highlighted by those students we interviewed was the way in which feedback is given out:

One girl had her essay back, and it was a crap mark, right in the seminar just before she did a presentation, that was awful, they don’t have to just shove it back at the start of the seminar unless there’s time to talk about it with the tutor.

If we DO want students to learn to engage more effectively with feedback, and not just shove it in their bags and forget about it, we need to consider, then, how handing work back without offering the opportunity to discuss it, or acknowledging the potential tension of the assignment hand back, can give a powerful message that, as one student put it:

It’s too late now to do anything about it, so why bother!

Summary: the strengths of the current system are its apparent standardisation and its perceived ‘fairness’. Those who use feedback sheets effectively see them as part of an ongoing critical dialogue from which they can learn for future assignments. Currently, however, the ways in which work is handed back ‘in a rush’ can reinforce students’ negative thinking that each piece of work is ‘done now’ and no longer relevant to learning.

Recommendations

- Setting aside time at the end of seminars to discuss marks and feedback
- Building in to modules time for each student to have at least one one-to-one about their progress during the module.
- Considering more widely the purpose of feedback in general.

The next section will develop these recommendations further in a summative discussion.

6. Summary of Findings – Recommendations, Implications and Considerations

The recommendations and implications of this report can be summarised two ways: firstly, in practical terms (what we can build on to make feedback more effective) and secondly, in theoretical terms (how further research could make an intervention into the current debates on feedback in university, and enable us to think of feedback more generally).
Practical recommendations:

- Implement ‘what to expect from feedback’ session at the start of modules, both in the first year and beyond, to emphasise how the criteria changes as students progress through their degree, and to make more transparent the assessment processes.

- Establishing student support sessions in which the emphasis is on developing independent learning skills, and learning when and what questions are appropriate to ask, thus generating a sense of responsibility in/ownership of one’s learning.

- Encourage peer reviews and other mutually supportive learning experiences both to share information and experiences.

- In both of the above, the tutor’s role could be one of facilitator, rather than the existing and somewhat limiting role of ‘gatekeeper’ in the conventional post-assignment session in which the tutor reveals his/her opinion of the cohort’s general performance.

- Feedback sheets could be typed and standardised.

- Feedback sessions should be an integral part of the module itself, minimising the current tendency to ‘rush’ marked assignments back at the end of a seminar.

Wider implications

- Considering definitions: Tutors could spend some time discussing and reflecting on what we mean by feedback, learning and work. What are the purposes of feedback? More research is needed to further examine this possible mismatch of assumptions (possibly between tutors as well as tutors and their students) as to what feedback is all about.

- Rethinking the current system: Rushing marked assignments back in an (unrelated) seminar does not encourage the student to take the time to reflect on and discuss the marks and comments. Instead, it exacerbates the student tendency to see work as a series of unrelated pieces of work and not an on-going learning process. We need to consider here how the current system may implicitly encourage the very kinds of student behaviours and assumptions that we are critiquing.

Considerations- concluding discussion

In general, these findings seem to be drawing us towards a conclusion that meetings, assessment discussions, study skills and learning support are best offered as an integral part of the module as a whole rather than an optional ‘add on’ in the form of extra tutorials and essay workshops.

One-to-one tutorials are an ideal, but an impractical one: we are sure tutors themselves would also enjoy being able to engage with the students as they reflect on their learning, rather than a
faceless mass in the lecture theatre and afterwards, a never-ending stream of students 'demanding things'.

Whilst communication between student and lecturer will never practically achieve this ideal, more integral support sessions to reflect on learning are recommended, so that rather than working in isolation, students can work effectively together, and can thus work out when it is and isn't necessary to see the tutor. More time for self reflection and reflection on feedback built into modules, would mean that we do not continue to give students the impression that feedback is given out and forgotten about in one seminar (one at which, we have already 'moved on' to other topics).

This also means tutors may need to address the purposes of the feedback forms, and how to make the process more consistent and transparent, discussing with each other the 'discursive modes' used. It is not only students who can benefit from constructive and supportive peer reviews.

This enables both the tutor and the student to see, develop and comment on their assignments as part of a learning journey rather than a series of seemingly unconnected deadlines, and to move away from the cynical approach of:

\textit{Once I've done my essay that's it, I've done it and it's in and that's it, I just care if I've passed or not, but I don't think about it}

This is the instrumental/superficial approach to learning that we as tutors deplore. However we have to consider that rather than battling against it, we do need to appreciate that the very systems of assessment feedback, such as the vague exhortations on feedback sheets, the rushed hand-back at the end of a seminar, and the limited time and opportunities for retrospective discussion, may actually encourage that very approach.

What is also important to consider here is that whilst there is an ever-growing field of research into what makes students learn, what engages them with feedback, \textit{how} they learn, and so on, we are still labouring under the impression that an optional, add-on essay writing workshop will somehow mop up the struggling minority who can't keep up with their courses. Thus we need to address here how the very frameworks of our modules can exacerbate that assumption in the way we apparently give such a low priority to skills teaching (cf Haggis 2006).

Co-working amongst mutually supportive student study skills groups could incorporate a wider range of learning models than the dominant model of 'private study', as well as helping students foster a sense of belonging and community. It also makes retention of struggling students more likely thus maintaining student numbers. Making the processes of learning and assessment more transparent also empowers the student to find his or her 'voice' in academic culture as well as clarifying the assumptions behind the institutionalised voices s/he is struggling to comprehend. Our project starts to suggest that students feel alienated from their learning, and need to know \textit{how} to learn, how to understand feedback, what to do with it, when to ask questions, what questions are appropriate to ask – and, ultimately, when to just get on with it.
Appendix One; Outcomes of previous project

The Students’ Transition Report was successful in highlighting students’ attitudes to key aspects of current university life. Our recommendations arising from the findings have informed the current induction system and general teaching practices in the following ways:

- Induction week now includes a welcome weekend
- A personal tutoring system has now been implemented
- Faculty implementation of Graduate development Programme
- Presentation of findings informed discussions of good teaching practice at an HLSS Faculty Awayday 21st March 2006
- Kate Brooks ran a teaching workshop informed by our findings, for new tutors at the MeCCSA Post-Graduate Conference at UWE in July 2007.

Appendix Two; Dissemination of Project Findings

These findings are being internally circulated within the University faculties, and both this and the previous project will inform two journal articles. The aims of this ongoing research are:

1. To make our findings available across faculties:
   - to inform tutors of what students expect and how they respond to feedback
   - to inform effective teaching practice within UWE
   - to support and inform extra-modular workshops on essay writing and other academic skills.

2. To continue writing up papers to contribute to field of teaching and learning studies. It is expected that out of both projects we will write up a number of papers for publication, two are already in progress. One on the students’ transition experience (focusing on students’ investments in learning orientations), the second on students’ perceptions of effective and ineffective feedback, for the Art, Media and Design Higher Education Academy magazine, Networks.

3. To present conference papers for discussion: one paper on effective teaching practices and students’ perceptions was presented at the MeCCSA PG Conference, UWE 2007, and a further paper on students’ investments in learning has been accepted by the Social Policy and Social Work Conference on ‘University life uncovered’, November 2007.
Appendix Three; student questionnaire

This aim of this brief questionnaire is to get an idea of what students want from tutor feedback. We may also want to talk to you about your opinions on feedback – if you’d be happy to help us, and would like to be entered for a draw to win an iPod, please write your name and email address at the end. Thank you for taking the time to fill this in- please continue on the back if you’ve got more to say!

Kate Brooks, Kieran Kelly, Project Co-ordinators

Award: ..........................................................Level: 1 2 3 [please circle]

What kind of feedback do you usually get? (e.g feedback forms, written comments on essays)
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What kinds of feedback have helped you the most? Can you explain why?
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What kinds of feedback have been least helpful? Again, can you explain?
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What kinds of feedback would be most effective, do you think? What kinds of feedback do you think students need?
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Can we talk to you some more? Please PRINT a name and contact no/email address below:
Appendix Four: Student interview/focus group question schedule

Expectations and experiences of uni feedback:

1. How did tutors give you feedback at 6th form/college?

2. How does this compare to uni?

3. What form of feedback were you expecting to get at uni? How does the feedback you get, compare with what you’d expected?

Using and understanding feedback:

4. Generally what kinds of experiences have you had with feedback so far, at uni?

5. What do you do with feedback? How/is it useful?

6. What works, for you? What doesn’t? Why?

The feedback system:

7. How do you feel about handing work in ‘anonymously’?

8. [re: general feedback that they want one-to-one feedback with tutors]: have you ever been to see a tutor about your feedback/essay? How was that?

9. What kinds of feedback would be most useful, to you? What feedback would you give tutors about their feedback?!

10. Anything else you’d like to add, or that you think tutors should know?
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