engaging students with assessment feedback

Final Report for FDTL5 Project 144/03 – June 2008
The FDTL project involved three partner organisations: Oxford Brookes University; University of Bedfordshire and Bradford University. The authors of this report gratefully acknowledge the funding provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England which enabled this project to be undertaken.
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The authors of this report gratefully acknowledge the funding provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England which enabled this project to be undertaken. This project is identified as 144/03.

Thanks also go to all colleagues who contributed to the successful outcome of this project by acting as liaison officers, leading case studies and initiatives, organising student questionnaires, participating in staff interviews, or contributing to discussions about the research findings and implications. Specifically, we would like to thank Linda Cinderey, Berry O’Donovan, Sean Gammon, Jackie Harvey, Zahid Hussain, Lesley Lawrence, Jacky Mack, Peter Morgan, Birgit den Outer, Pamela Pickford, Helen Pokorny, Sarah Quinton, Gail Sanders, Teresa Smallbone, Alice Szwelnik and Dorota Ujma.

Furthermore, the authors would like to express their appreciation to Professor Steve Swithinby and Dr Chris Rust, who both kindly contributed their time and expertise to the project’s steering group.
Section 2
Forward

Feedback is one of the most powerful components of the learning experience. Yet, recent surveys, quality reports and research investigations all suggest that more could be done to realise the potential of feedback for learning. Not surprisingly, many institutions are reviewing the quality of the feedback that students receive within modules and programmes with a view to making improvements in this area. This report is therefore especially timely as it provides a framework for thinking about feedback and many ideas about how to enhance practice. This should be of immediate value to policy makers, teaching co-ordinators and academic staff.

The report discusses the outputs of a large research and development project established under the Higher Education Academy’s Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL). The project involved collaboration across a number of business schools in UK universities, although the findings have much wider applicability. The outputs include a literature review, surveys and semi-structured interviews with academic staff and students, case studies and in-depth explorations of key feedback issues. The case studies and the explorations are particularly useful resources for institutions thinking about seeding new feedback practices.

There are three features of this report that strike me as especially important. Firstly, the authors take a broad perspective on feedback and on how to implement improved practices. Feedback is not simply about teachers providing helpful written comments on students’ assignments, important as that is. Rather, effective feedback is viewed as a multi-faceted and ongoing process that is relational and situated in a socio-cultural context. This broad perspective has obvious implications for the design of feedback.

One implication is that there must be alignment of feedback processes at task, module and programme level so that students receive consistent messages about what is expected. Another is that we must create learning environments where students feel comfortable and confident in seeking out feedback from teachers.

The second and main feature of this report is its specific focus on ways of engaging students with feedback. Engagement is important because, no matter how much feedback is delivered, students still have to pay attention to it, process it and turn it into actions that improve subsequent work. Unless they do this, feedback has no effect and staff time is wasted. Just as you cannot learn to play basketball just by listening to the coach, so you cannot learn to produce a better essay just by reading teacher feedback. This suggests that feedback is a partnership and its implementation must be shared across teachers and students. The authors of this report have piloted and evaluated a range of practical methods to ensure student engagement including the use of exemplars to clarify requirements and to enhance receptivity to feedback, feedback conversations through peer review, feedback-on-drafts and self-critiquing to generate inner feedback. Importantly, for each method there is a diagram, a timeline and a set of tips for others who might wish to try out these ideas themselves.
A third feature of the report is its emphasis on cost-effective feedback practices. Most of the applications that the authors discuss should improve student learning without increasing staff time. This is particularly important in the current climate of ever-shrinking resources. The approach advocated is not merely about making ‘feedback delivery’ more effective and streamlined; on the contrary, the authors are suggesting a subtle but important change in the way that we think about effectiveness: namely, students must engage with feedback and must express it in action for it to be genuinely (cost) effective. Engagement is also necessary if feedback is to fulfil its transformative potential.

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April 2009
Section 3
Executive Summary

Purpose
This report presents the findings of a research project which investigated student engagement with formative feedback leading to practical guidelines for academic staff as well as policy recommendations at institutional level.

Funding and partners
The project was established under the Higher Education Academy’s Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (‘FDTL’), and involved collaboration with a number of Higher Education institutions in the UK. Partner institutions for this project were Oxford Brookes University, and the Universities of Bradford and Bedfordshire. Cascade partners were the University of Northumbria, University of West of England, University of Sunderland, Bournemouth University and London Metropolitan University.

Theoretical perspectives
The research drew on a number of theoretical perspectives on feedback, but was primarily influenced by a socio-constructivist approach. This approach recognises that student engagement with feedback forms part of the broader processes of learning. Feedback is situated – in language, culture, relationships and other contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all method. However, feedback cannot ‘do’ everything. It is fundamental to learning, but only one of many influences and processes which combine to generate a learning experience.

Research design
Building on an initial literature review, the research was conducted through four strands of work. Strand 1 involved 35 semi-structured interviews with students and staff from the three partner institutions, and investigated their perspectives and experiences of feedback in an HE context. Strand 2 involved 776 questionnaires from students at the three partner institutions to ascertain student evaluations of different forms of feedback. Strand 3 involved seven case studies at the three partner institutions to investigate different feedback methods including peer review, feedback-on-drafts, self-assessment, and exemplar assignments. Strand 4 involved five initiatives undertaken by cascade partners to investigate issues identified in case studies or the literature review, including replication of some feedback methods.

Main findings
The project operated with the premise that if students are to engage with formative feedback, they need to receive it, and to pay attention to it as they seek to understand it. Furthermore, if they are to engage in an effective way which supports their learning, students need opportunities and a willingness to apply the feedback.

Our research identified many reasons for student lack of engagement. For example, formative feedback may be incomprehensible because of technical jargon or because it is illegible or inaudible (depending on the media). Students may find feedback difficult to understand if they cannot relate it to the assessment criteria, or to what their ‘performance gap’ is supposed to be. Student disengagement may be expressed as a refusal (or reluctance) to collect marked assignments if the student anticipates that feedback will not help with future work. Here we see the impact of previous, and rather negative, encounters with assessment and feedback practices; and so the cycle goes on.
Our main findings, which are discussed at length in the main report, are that:

- A wide range of feedback methods are currently used in the Higher Education context.
- Confusion about the purpose of feedback leads to disagreement among staff and students about what constitutes ‘useful’ feedback.
- Student engagement with feedback is strongly influenced by their evaluation of their ability to apply it. This relates to students’ ability to understand feedback; students’ expectations of the utility of feedback; and students’ perception of self-efficacy. Furthermore, if feedback is to be useful, students need to understand it in the context of their assignments and the criteria used to assess them.
- Student willingness to engage in a dialogue about feedback is strongly influenced by the relational dimension of the feedback process.
- Staff engagement with students and student feedback may be enabled or constrained by resource availability and institutional policies.
- Students need guidance as they transition to an HE environment.

**Recommendations**

Evidence of student dissatisfaction with feedback has already spurred action in some HE institutions. However, as senior managers, academic and support staff grapple with the problems of student engagement, there is a risk that time and money will be wasted promulgating feedback practices which are ineffective. In the current context of limited institutional resources, time and money should be better spent.

Our research shows that change is possible. Students can be encouraged to engage with feedback in ways that result in improvements in their satisfaction and their performance. Appropriate interventions at the module, programme and institutional level can encourage students to engage with, and apply, feedback, rather than ‘throw it in the bin’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Furthermore, the involvement of staff and students in these interventions can facilitate better awareness and understanding of the nature of feedback and the options available to enhance student engagement.

Drawing on the findings from this research, we make the following recommendations for enhancing student engagement with feedback. These recommendations are discussed at length in the main report.

- Create an appropriate environment which encourages student engagement with feedback.
- Integrate feedback methods and practices with strategies at the module, programme, and assessment levels (using methods such as those illustrated in Appendix 2).
- Recognise that feedback operates – and may be delivered – in multiple ways and should be adapted to suit students’ levels of engagement, their prior knowledge, and their epistemological orientations.
- Prepare students for engaging with feedback and dialogue.
- Prepare staff to give feedback.
4.1 Project Context

This project was established under the Higher Education Academy’s Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (‘FDTL’) to investigate student engagement with formative feedback in a way which would lead to practical guidelines as well as policy recommendations at institutional level.

The focus on formative feedback is particularly timely and relevant given the problems identified from the National Student Survey over the past two years. Whilst students are generally satisfied with their courses, many are unhappy with feedback. In the 2007 survey, 82% of students expressed satisfaction with teaching; however only 54% agreed that feedback had been prompt and had helped to clarify points they did not understand (Tahir, THES, 2008). Student concerns are one of the reasons why ‘high quality and timely feedback’ was identified as a priority issue in the FDTL programme of work, and why the topic of ‘assessment and feedback’ is an important focus for the HEA subject centres. The central role played by assessment and feedback is increasingly being recognised at institutional and national levels (e.g. Burgess Report, 2007).

The project involved collaboration with a number of Higher Education institutions in the UK, which facilitated the sharing of ideas and best practices through a process of collaboration. In this way, the project’s modus operandi reflected the spirit of the HEA’s Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, which supports projects ‘aimed at stimulating developments in teaching and learning in higher education [and encourages] the dissemination of good teaching and learning practices across the Higher Education sector’. Partner institutions for this project were Bradford, Bedfordshire and Oxford Brookes Universities. Cascade partners were the University of Northumbria, University of West of England, University of Sunderland, Bournemouth University and London Metropolitan University.

This project builds on a body of research in the areas of assessment and feedback, and student engagement in Higher Education. Furthermore, the work undertaken during this project has influenced – and been influenced by relevant initiatives such as REAP, projects funded under the FDTL such as FAST, and work developed under the auspices of the HEA’s Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning.
4.2 Why feedback?
Feedback is essential to our process of learning. Whether it is given by peers or staff, or is a visible outcome of actions input into a simulation, or is internally-generated through reflection – feedback helps us in understanding the consequences of our actions so that we can then change them.

In the context of Higher Education, academic staff use formative assessment-and-feedback methods to engage students with the knowledge and capabilities they need to become accomplished practitioners in their academic discipline. Didactic methods are rarely enough by themselves; students often want and need more so that they can learn the skills of criticality and what it takes to apply disciplinary knowledge and competencies in authentic ways. Assessment also has a role in ‘measuring’ standards in order to accredit learning. This summative role of assessment is just as vital as the formative role. However, part of the problem with student dis-engagement with feedback arises from a tendency to conflate the two roles. In this project, we focus on the formative role of feedback: to support – rather than measure – learning.

4.3 Organisation of this report
The project report is structured in the following way. First, we present the aims and objectives of the projects, and briefly outline the organisation of the project into four strands of work. We then explain the theoretical orientations which framed the design and conduct of the research, and which influenced our conceptualisation of ‘feedback’ and ‘engagement’. This is followed by a description of the research design focusing on the four work strands. Section 8 presents the main findings from the project. The findings are a summary and synthesis of the detailed findings for each of the four strands, which are reported as appendices. Finally, we present our recommendations in section 9.
Section 5
Aims and objectives of the FDTL project

The aims of the project, as specified in the 2004 project proposal, were to:

1. develop cost-effective practices and procedures to engage students with assessment feedback;
2. encourage the adoption of practices which will engage students with assessment feedback; and
3. share understanding of students experiences within the HE community.

To achieve this, and drawing on an initial literature review, we developed a research design composed of four inter-relating strands of research, complemented by a dissemination strategy for communicating the research findings. The research design and findings for each strand have been separately documented in four reports available as appendices. To provide a context for this report, the strands are summarised in section 7 below.

The literature review and research strands enabled us to achieve the first of the documented aims, which was to develop cost-effective practices to engage students with formative feedback. Specific assessment-and-feedback methods are documented in the Case Study report (Strand 3) and in the Cascade Partner Initiative report (Strand 4). Methods include peer review, self-assessment, exemplars, online-discussion boards, and feedback-on-drafts. Also documented in the Cascade Partner report is the use of workshops to develop students/staff awareness of the importance of assessment-and-feedback processes. The workshops aimed to enhance awareness of the critical and integral role of feedback in the HE learning experience, with a view to improving student engagement with it. However, as we discuss later, one-off interventions were shown to be insufficient to effect significant changes in student or staff attitudes and behaviour. As an alternative, we suggest that student engagement depends on a more radical approach which moves beyond single interventions or reliance solely on module-level changes. We argue that students will engage with feedback when they anticipate that they can apply it. This requires an integrated approach to assessment-and-feedback within disciplines and programmes, which may entail a significant overhaul of assessment practices.

The second and third of our project aims were achieved through our dissemination strategy which sought to communicate findings to three audiences: practitioners in the field; educational practitioners; and policy-makers at institutional levels. By adopting multiple strategies, we aimed not only to communicate findings and best practices, but also to promote and embed change.
This section presents the theoretical approach which framed our research. The limitations of space mean that we cannot do justice in this report to the extensive literature review conducted at the beginning of this project. The full literature review is available from the project website; what follows is a summary of the key messages.

6.1 Key messages from the feedback literature

Feedback is essential to the process of learning. This assumption is a dominant feature of pedagogic theory which recognises the pivotal role of feedback: as Laurillard (1993, p.61) has said, ‘action without feedback is completely unproductive for the learner’. This principle applies throughout our lives as well as in educational settings: we use intrinsic and extrinsic feedback to guide our actions and the development of our thoughts, values and ways-of-being. Whether one adopts a neo-behaviourist, cognitivist, socio-constructivist or post-modern perspective on learning, feedback has a central role to play: as reinforcement; as information from which to correct ‘errors’; as guidance on socially-constructed standards; or as an indicator of appropriate discourse (Askew and Lodge, 2000; Fenwick, 2000). Feedback is essential to our lifelong development but its importance is perhaps greatest (and most visible) during periods of formal education: at these times, students are primed to expect assessment feedback from knowledgeable others, and to be developing skills of self-assessment for themselves.

We know from the literature that students want feedback and appreciate good feedback (Hyland 2000; O’Donovan et al. 2001; Higgins et al. 2001). However, we also know that student experiences of feedback are varied and all-too-often rather negative. In the UK, for example, student dissatisfaction with feedback has been a prominent feature of the National Student Satisfaction Survey for the past three years. In the 2007 survey, whilst 82% of students were satisfied with their courses, only 54% agreed that feedback had been prompt and had helped to clarify points they did not understand (Tahir, THES, 2008).

The academic literature also tells a sorry tale. Whilst some students find feedback transformative and motivating, others become confused if feedback raises more questions than it answers (Lillis and Turner, 2001). At times, feedback may be dismissed as irrelevant. Some students, in order to protect the integrity of their beliefs and knowledge, will reject corrective feedback and find ways to discredit or devalue it (Chinn and Brewer, 1993). It is for these and many other reasons that students may not even collect – let alone reflect on – marked coursework containing formative feedback written by academic staff. The unfortunate reality is that ‘it is not inevitable that students will read and pay attention to feedback even when that feedback is lovingly crafted and provided promptly’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.20). This situation is unproductive for both students and staff, and suggests that the potential for feedback to enhance student learning is considerably underdeveloped.

We also recognise that student engagement with feedback forms part of the broader processes of learning. Feedback is situated - in language, culture and relationships, for example. This means that the socio-cultural context of feedback should be taken into account when developing effective feedback methods. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ method.

Feedback cannot ‘do’ everything, however. It is fundamental to learning, but only one of many influences and processes which combine to generate a learning experience. What, then, is feedback?
6.2 Defining feedback (and students’ engagement with it)

The literature has defined ‘feedback’ in a number of ways. Sadler (1989) provides a useful interpretation by focusing on the effect of feedback. He proposes that feedback is information given to a student about the gap between actual performance and the performance goal in a way which helps the student attain that goal. To this definition we would add the rider that feedback may be created with the tutor’s intention to help the student even though no change occurs.

This simple definition of feedback hides the complexity of assessment and feedback processes in the context of Higher Education. Feedback is given and received as part of a complex, iterative process of learning through assessment, and in that context, assessment and feedback have multiple functions. A central question in recent debates is whether assessment and feedback are or should be ‘for’ learning (i.e. formatively supporting the process of student learning) or ‘of’ learning (i.e. summatively measuring the result of student learning, where the feedback is simply the grade communicating the results of the summative assessment). Of course, assessment and feedback processes can achieve both objectives: problems may arise when assessment/feedback policies and practices try to achieve both purposes at the same time or using the same methods.

The temporal dimension of feedback is also relevant. Feedback is typically interpreted in relation to (and not in isolation from) previous experiences and knowledge, and expectations of future events. Furthermore, feedback may be re-interpreted in the future in the light of new experiences. This temporal dynamic means that good formative feedback – which helps students to learn by seeing and addressing their performance gaps – is likely to be retrospective as well as prospective. By this we mean that a piece of feedback will ‘feed backwards’ to help students analyse and critique their completed assignment against the assessment criteria; as well as ‘feed forwards’ to help students develop the capabilities appropriate for possible future assignments.

So far, we have defined feedback in a way which positions it as a product, typically generated by a tutor. Whilst it is sometimes useful to see feedback in this bounded way, the definition is limited to the extent that it fails to capture the process by which students engage with feedback and with the context in which they interpret the feedback. An important contrast here is between a traditional cognitivist perspective on feedback which emphasises feedback-as-product, and a socio-constructivist perspective which sees feedback as an integral part of the process of learning (Rust et al., 2005) within a socio-cultural context. In the latter perspective, which informs our research, there is an assumption that feedback is interpreted against a contextual backdrop of structural influences. For example, students bring their socio-cultural heritage to a Higher Education environment which is organised by discipline, department or degree programme, and these contextual influences will interact to create a student experience.

5. Sadler (1989) suggests that: ‘Summative contrasts with formative assessment in that it is concerned with summing up or summarising the achievement status of a student, and is geared towards reporting at the end of a course of study especially for purposes of certification. It is essentially passive and does not normally have immediate impact on learning.

The primary distinction between formative and summative assessment relates to purpose and effect, not to timing.’ (Sadler, 1989)
Furthermore, there is a more personal, ‘relational’ dimension to feedback where students’ interpretation and engagement with feedback is partly dependent on their relations with the person(s) giving it. As Watzlawick et al. have argued (1967), following Gregory Bateson, ‘every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a meta-communication’. This means, for example, that dissonant feedback is not necessarily attended to in a positive way, but may be rejected outright if the person giving the feedback lacks credibility in the eyes of the student (see also Chinn and Brewer, 1993). The relational dimension involves dynamics of trust and of credibility of the tutor’s grasp of the content. A particularly important aspect of the relational dimension is the potential for dialogue: does the student feel comfortable about asking for clarification, for example? We argue later in this report that the relational dimension of feedback is just as important as the content of feedback.

‘Feedback’ can thus be conceptualised as a product as well as a process; and has a content as well as a relational dimension. The risk for educationalists is that feedback may be over-simplified by being reduced to tangible products such as written feedback sheets to the neglect of the processual aspects such as dialogue.

If ‘feedback’ is difficult to define, ‘student engagement with feedback’ is perhaps more problematic. This is because engagement is difficult to observe and investigate in a measurable way. Whilst there have been efforts to measure the broader nature of educational engagement using student questionnaires (eg NSSE, 2008) these have tended to focus on student reports of their behaviours in class, and their ‘mental’ activities such as analysis. As Hand and Bryson (2008) have argued, this particular interpretation of engagement may capture some of its manifestations ‘but does not offer much clarity in really explaining how the student experiences education and the consequences of those experiences’ (p4). Similar questions surround efforts to measure student engagement with feedback.

An alternative perspective in this debate comes from considering the polar opposite of engagement: is it ‘dis-engagement’, ie an absence of engagement? Or can it be a purposeful act such as rejecting the authority of the feedback? The work of Chinn and Brewer (1993) is relevant here in giving a processual view of engagement which emphasises the choices available to students on receiving feedback. In their study of science students, Chinn and Brewer showed that when students received anomalous feedback which contradicted their existing theories and concepts, their responses could not be categorised as a simple dichotomy between ‘engagement’ and ‘dis-engagement’. Instead, students demonstrated a more complex set of responses. Some of the responses included: ignoring the feedback without bothering to explain the contradictions; considering and then rejecting the validity of the feedback; re-interpreting the feedback; or accepting its validity and acting on it.
The work of Chinn and Brewer (1993) is useful because it re-frames ‘engagement’ as a process in which students have choices of action. A processual conception of engagement is helpful in an educational context because it allows questions to be asked about how academics can influence students’ choices. Building on their work, we propose a process of student engagement with feedback which emphasises students’ responses and actions. Figure 1 illustrates the potential steps through which a student engages with feedback.

Figure 1: Process of student engagement with feedback

Not all students will engage fully with the formative feedback provided for them, however. Engagement may be halted at a number of points in the process illustrated above, and students may respond to the feedback (or the giver of feedback) in a number of ways. Figure 2 illustrates some of the dynamics involved.

Figure 2: Process of student engagement (or dis-engagement) with feedback

Figure 2 indicates that engagement may be at a surface or deep level, resulting in different possible outcomes. For example, students engaging at a surface level may apply specific elements of the feedback only if the new assignment is the same type, or if the assessment tutor is the person who gave the original feedback. On the other hand, students engaging at a deeper level may be able to abstract the fundamental principles communicated in the feedback, and then apply those principles in different types of assignment.

Having outlined our conceptualisation of the key constructs relevant to this research, the next section presents the research design.
We identified earlier that the project drew on a variety of theoretical perspectives on feedback, but was primarily influenced by a socio-constructivist approach as exemplified in the work of Rust et al., 2005. Implicit in this approach are some key assumptions:

- Staff and students are active participants in an interactive feedback process. As active participants, students seek to construct meanings based upon their own experience and beliefs, formulate their own learning goals, and engage in actions to achieve those goals in a continuous reflexive process (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, 2004);
- Feedback is not simply a matter of linear communication but involves complex ‘issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse’ (Higgins et al. 2001, p.272); and
- Assessment and feedback are culturally and contextually situated. For instance, they operate within institutions constituted in – as well as being sites of – discourse and power (Lea and Street, 1998).

Bringing these ideas together a central theme which informed both the research design and analysis was the premise that student engagement with assessment feedback is not a student responsibility alone. Student engagement is not simply a function of psychological factors such as self motivation and time spent on extra curricular activities. Instead, engagement is part of (and influenced by) a wider process involving others inside and/or outside a community of practice. The interactions between context, staff and students produce student (and staff) engagement.

These assumptions were reflected in the project research questions which focussed the research:

- How do staff deliver feedback (eg in terms of style)?
- How do staff view feedback (eg in terms of time; of utility; and in terms of student responses) (Samelowicz and Bain, 2002)?
- How do staff use feedback (eg in terms of effects on teaching style and inputs to students) (Black and Wiliam, 1998)?
- How do students perceive feedback (eg what it is for; whether it is important) (Higgins et al. 2002)?
- How do students use feedback (eg how do they understand it and apply it to current and future work)?
- How do staff-student relationships affect the way feedback operates, with a specific focus on feedback content (Hyatt, 2005)?
To explore these research questions, four strands of work were identified. The reports for each strand are referenced in the Appendices.

- **Strand 1**: 35 semi-structured interviews with students and staff from the three project partner institutions, to investigate their perspectives and experiences of feedback in an HE context.
- **Strand 2**: 776 questionnaires from students at the three project partner institutions, to ascertain student evaluations of different forms of feedback.
- **Strand 3**: seven case studies at the three project partner institutions to investigate different feedback methods, including peer review, feedback-on-drafts, self-assessment, and exemplar assignments.
- **Strand 4**: five initiatives undertaken by cascade partners to investigate issues identified in case studies or the literature review, including replication of some feedback methods.

The research strategy was iterative to ensure that early insights were re-investigated in later research activities. The staff / student interviews and questionnaire provided rich meta data from staff and students about their perspectives on feedback (an area which the project literature review had identified as under-explored) which, in an iterative process, informed the investigative case studies. The resulting synthesis was explored further through smaller initiatives at the cascade partner institutions (see Tables 1 and 2 below). The research was therefore designed to enhance validity through triangulation by providing a range of empirical evidence from which to analyse student engagement with feedback.
## Table 1: Institutional involvement in work strands 1, 2 and 3 (Project Partners)

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<td><strong>Bradford</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Oxford Brookes</strong></td>
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## Table 2: Institutional involvement in work strand 4 (Cascade Partners)

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<td>University of West of England engagement and achievement</td>
<td>Exploring the impact of regular, formative on-line feedback on student engagement and achievement</td>
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<td>London Metropolitan University</td>
<td>Student evaluation of feedback</td>
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Research methods

During the period of research, a range of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used as appropriate to the aims of each Strand, and to the research questions under investigation. By using data from different perspectives (students and staff), and by employing multiple data collection methods, we sought to improve the rigour of the research through the principle of triangulation.

Data collection techniques included questionnaires; interviews (audio-taped one-to-one feedback sessions, face-to-face semi-structured or open-ended interviews with students and staff); student focus groups; and observations of feedback sessions. Data was also obtained from documentation such as self-assessment forms; self-reflective essays; feedback pro-forma forms; and module evaluation forms.

The quantitative data from the questionnaires (Strand 2) and from case studies (Strands 3 and 4) were analysed using descriptive statistics or, in the case of the questionnaire, cross-tabulations. In some case studies (eg Case study 2) the change in the quality of student assignments (where more than one was completed) was also assessed to try to establish the effectiveness of feedback.

Qualitative interview data was analysed thematically to draw out patterns of experiences among students and staff. The use of the proprietary software package, NVivo, enabled the research to proceed iteratively between data collection and analysis, using techniques of constant comparative method, memoing, and deviant case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The analysis of qualitative data is fundamentally a process of interpretation and judgement guided by theoretical frameworks which – as far as possible – are made explicit when communicating the research. As part of our strategy we validated our findings by discussing the raw data – and then the findings – with others inside and external to the project. In the early stages of analysis, for example, interview transcripts were discussed extensively within the extended project team in order to produce robust interpretations whilst discarding others which – on reflection – lacked empirical evidence. We also used early seminars and workshops with staff at partner institutions as opportunities to test the face validity of findings so that, if necessary, we could go back to re-analyse data. Whenever an opportunity arose, we discussed findings with student representatives to gauge whether the ‘student voice’ was fairly reflected.

Much of the research in this project involved case studies (Strand 3) or specific initiatives such as feedback workshops for students and staff (Strands 3 and 4). The nature of case-based research is that it involves the study of complex phenomena embedded in a context. As such, case-based research contrasts with cross-sectional survey-based research which gathers descriptive data (Strand 2); and interviews with individuals about their personal experiences which gives a deeper understanding of individual meanings (Strand 1). The empirical context for case studies is important when interpreting data and so the individual reports for Strands 3 and 4 describe the context for each case.
Case studies are not intended to generate statistical generalisations, but, as with all qualitative research, can lead to two other forms of generalisability: conceptual generalisations, for example about the nature of ‘engagement’ (Firestone, 1993); and case-to-case generalisations, where the rich descriptions of the context and findings allow readers to transfer insights to their own institutions and contexts (Kvale 1996; Firestone, 1993; Mason, 1996). It is also important to emphasise that the four strands of work were designed from a baseline of a comprehensive literature review, and the experience of the project team in the field of assessment and feedback. None of our findings are significantly out-of-line with the themes of prior research, and in many cases we have developed them to a considerable extent.

**Research populations**

Although the research population for the four Strands varied to a certain degree, all research participants were undergraduates or postgraduates at one of eight university business schools in England. The purpose of this disciplinary sample was to reduce to some extent the inevitable heterogeneity of the student HE population. Within the parameter of the business discipline there are clearly differences between module participants, institutional contexts and so on. Nevertheless, the range of institutions involved in the project gives us no grounds for concern that we have an abnormal sample of students or staff.
Section 8
8 Main findings

We began this project with the premise that if students are to engage with formative feedback, they need to receive it, and to pay attention to it as they seek to understand it. Furthermore, if they are to engage in an effective way which supports their learning, students need opportunities and a willingness to apply the feedback.

As the popular saying goes, there’s many a slip between cup and lip. Student engagement is no exception, and this is because feedback is an element of a complex process of learning. For example, formative feedback may be incomprehensible because of technical jargon or because it is illegible or inaudible (depending on the media). On the other hand, students may find feedback difficult to understand if they cannot relate it to the assessment criteria (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004), or to what their ‘performance gap’ is supposed to be. Student disengagement may be expressed as a refusal (or reluctance) to collect marked assignments if the student anticipates that feedback won’t help with future work. Here we see the impact of previous, and rather negative, encounters with assessment and feedback practices; and so the cycle goes on.

Section 8.1 begins by summarising the range of feedback methods used by staff or experienced by students involved in this research. Section 8.2 discusses the sense of confusion experienced by some staff and students about the function of feedback, which can lead to disagreement about what constitutes ‘useful’ feedback. Student perceptions of feedback utility is discussed further in section 8.3. Here, we begin to unpack student engagement in terms of students’ evaluation of whether they can apply the feedback – whether they understand it and judge it to be useful; and whether they perceive themselves as having the capabilities required to apply it or ask questions about it. In contrast to sections 8.2 and 8.3 which emphasise the content of feedback, section 8.4 presents findings relating to the relational dimension of feedback which mediates student engagement and particularly their willingness to enter into dialogue with others about their work and learning. Section 8.5 takes an another perspective by discussing staff engagement with feedback. Finally, section 8.6 discusses problems of student transition to an HE environment.

8.1 A wide range of feedback methods are used in the HE context

Staff perspectives
Table 3 summarises the range of feedback methods used by the staff interviewed for this research. The heterogeneity of methods was cause for bewilderment by some students (and staff) which we discuss later. The number of methods used exceeds the staff total because staff use more than one feedback method.
As can be seen from Table 3, tick-box feedback, feedback sheets and face-to-face feedback sessions are relatively prevalent. Tick-box forms are widely used at some institutions to provide written feedback. However, staff interviewed were ambivalent: one commented that such forms are ‘reasonably meaningless’; and others preferred not to use them for fear that students cannot comprehend them, preferring instead to write supplementary feedback.

Many staff (n.14 in our sample of three institutions) see students by appointment to discuss their feedback and work. Others expect students to come to their office to receive their marked assignments, at which point feedback is also discussed (n.4).

Several staff (n.6) give verbal feedback on student presentations. Other approaches to providing feedback include revision sessions (n.1), feedback on exams (n.2) and the use of exemplars. The variety of methods offered by staff is an indicator of their concern to provide effective feedback to students. Equally, the heterogeneity of methods suggests that staff sometimes take an individualistic approach to feedback – adopting methods that they feel are effective and relevant to their students – which may involve modifying standard approaches to communicate their message.

As regards the content of feedback, staff had a variety of approaches and styles. One interviewee talked of ‘writing pages and pages … all over [the script and feedback form]’, and of asking students to identify areas on which they’d like feedback. Another talked of being ‘an anorak about referencing’. Some staff were cautious about giving too much feedback, for fear that ‘you write the next piece of work for them’.

Whilst staff employed a variety of approaches, it is surprising few staff took measures to check whether students understood their feedback. One member of staff commented that he and his colleagues probably took it for granted that students instinctively know what to do with their feedback; yet, students’ comments suggest otherwise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tick box form</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Presentations/debate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Peer (non formative)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments form/page</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Discussion sessions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Staged</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments on script</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Formative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments by email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F2F on collection</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Feed-forward to next module</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F2F by appointment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Revision sessions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format not known</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Feedback seminar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Written exercise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grid highlighting grade</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Individual timetabled</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. X, Y and Z are codes given for each of the three partner institutions.
Student perspectives

Student perspectives on feedback are presented throughout this report. However, it is pertinent in this section to refer to student responses to the questionnaire conducted as part of Strand 2. The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate student evaluations of the types of feedback they had experienced on an identified module (where different students were asked about different modules). The questionnaire contained two parts: Part 1 (items 1-7) obtained categorical data about students’ age; gender; nationality; year of entry to the University; full/part-time status; number of years in further education; and number of years in higher education; Part 2 (items 8-20) asked students specifically about the feedback they received on an identified module.

Items 8-18 asked students from the three partner institutions to rate the usefulness of different feedback methods, using a 5-point Likert Scale of ‘not at all useful’ to ‘very useful’. Table 4 shows the percentage figure for student responses indicating that feedback was ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’. The table is ranked so that the feedback methods most highly valued are shown at the top7.

Items 19-20 asked students to rate the extent to which feedback helped them to understand ‘what I am doing well’ (Q19), and ‘where I am going wrong’ (Q20), using a 5-point Likert Scale of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. Table 5 shows the percentage figure for responses indicating that students ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that feedback helps them.

The results of the frequency analysis for questions 8-18 shows that, overall, students evaluate most highly personalised feedback from the tutor (specifically, ‘individual written feedback’, ‘formal verbal feedback’ and ‘informal feedback’). Least valued is non-personalised feedback, or feedback not originating from the tutor (‘individual peer feedback’, ‘informal feedback from friends and family’, and ‘general feedback to all students on the module’).

The results of the cross-tabulations between the categorical questions and items 8-18 show that nationality, age, and years-in-HE are associated with students’ evaluations of some types of feedback.

- **Nationality:** International students rated ‘formal verbal feedback’ and ‘feedback on a self-assessment task’ significantly more highly than other students. UK students rated ‘general feedback to students’ significantly more highly than other students.

- **Years-in-HE:** The association between years-in-HE and students’ evaluation of ‘feedback on draft assignments’ is variable, in that students of two years of experience gave higher ratings than those with less experience; yet as students gain more experience in HE, their evaluations fall.

- **Age:** Students’ evaluation of ‘feedback on a self-assessment task’ varied according to age, with older students giving higher ratings than younger students.
Table 4: Ranked percentage figures for student perceptions of the utility of each feedback method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback method</th>
<th>% of ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ responses (rounded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q8. Individual written feedback from a tutor on this module (eg on coursework)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13. Informal verbal feedback from a tutor on this module, (eg during seminars</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12. Formal verbal feedback from a tutor on this module (eg during “Office Hours”)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Feedback on drafts of assignments</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18. Opportunity to give feedback to your peers</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11. Group peer feedback (eg after a presentation)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Feedback workshop arranged by a tutor on this module (eg session on feedback)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Feedback about a self-assessment task (eg on an action plan)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. Individual peer feedback (eg during seminars)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Informal feedback on your work from friends or family</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. General feedback to all students on this module, (eg by WebCT)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Percentage figure for student responses about how feedback had helped them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of feedback</th>
<th>% of ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ responses (rounded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on this module helped me to understand what I’m doing well</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on this module helped me to understand where I’m going wrong</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.2 Confusion about the purpose of feedback leads to disagreement about what constitutes ‘useful’ feedback

We argued earlier that feedback is given and received as part of a complex, iterative process of learning through assessment - whether the assessment is for formative or summative purposes. Assessment and feedback can achieve both - but problems may arise when staff try to achieve both purposes at the same time or using the same methods.

A tight coupling of formative and summative assessment can create confusion among tutors and their students about the purpose of feedback: what does it ‘look like’? and what is it for? Some students in our interviews saw their grade as synonymous with feedback, whilst some teaching staff saw feedback’s primary purpose as being to justify grades. One staff interviewee commented that she sometimes used feedback ‘to cover her back’ by justifying the mark to recipient students and marking-moderators. These views suggest that in certain circumstances, feedback is used mainly to validate the summative aspect of assessment – to the neglect of the formative aspect which is central to student learning. One student said she was ‘pretty appalled’ by most of the feedback she received, which in most cases was limited to a tick-box sheet:

‘There is no writing, there is just a number of boxes and crosses in them but it doesn’t say anything to you. So whilst I understand it, I don’t understand it in relation to my assignment because there is no framework around it. There is nothing; no explanation.’

Findings also indicated confusion among staff about the different functions of formative feedback, and about how to design appropriate feedback in different settings. We know from the literature, however, that feedback has a number of functions (Askew, 2000). Depending on the nature of the assessment and the level of the student, the function of feedback may be to correct errors, to explain to students why their work needs improvement, to prompt self-assessment, to provoke deeper understanding, to motivate, to provide developmental guidance, and to point to additional resources. These very different functions point to the need for different assessment and feedback methods at different points in modules and the degree programme. They also indicate the importance of personalising feedback to suit individual students.

A key problem for students interviewed was that a mismatch between students and staff about the purpose of feedback (or between staff themselves as they assess student work) could create considerable confusion and frustration. This suggests a need for more student and staff preparation about how to engage with feedback and dialogue (see also sections 8.6 and 8).

Finally, it is important to mention that whilst feedback is central to the learning process, it has its limitations and cannot solve all learning problems. Perhaps students’ dissatisfaction with feedback is a function of their exaggerated expectations of what feedback ‘should’ do, which again points to the need for student preparation about what feedback is and how it can be used.

8. Feedback can sometimes do no more than diagnose a problem which requires other resources to support the student. ‘Feedback’ is not the same as ‘instruction’; however, it is an essential element of everything we know of as ‘teaching’. How should we label the common interaction between tutor and student where the former responds to a student’s question or draft assignment and asks “have you thought about X?” Is this feedback? It is certainly likely to support and encourage learning, and may help the student by modelling a thinking process (Vygotsky, 1978). To some extent, as indicated earlier, a traditional definition of feedback which derives from cognitive science and closed-systems thinking is misleading when applied to an HE context. Individual learning in a socio-cultural context is a hugely complex process where dialogue has a significant role to play; ‘feedback’ is not interpreted in isolation to other conversations, but in relation to them.
8.3 Student engagement with feedback is strongly influenced by their evaluation of their ability to apply it

Students engage with what is potentially useful to them. Of course, there may be other reasons for reading feedback comments, for example to seek justification for a given mark. However, if students are to engage with formative feedback for the reasons intended by the tutor – i.e. to support student learning – there needs to be an expectation that the lessons drawn from engaging with feedback can be applied elsewhere.

Student evaluation of their ability to apply feedback is influenced by a number of factors: these include their understanding of the feedback; their expectations of the utility of feedback (linked to perceptions of the progressive nature of assessments); and their perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). These factors are inter-related as one might expect from a complex system of learning and development. For example, if students do not expect to be able to apply feedback in the near future, they may not bother to try to understand it; in that scenario, how can they ever know how useful the feedback might have been! On the other hand, some students will engage with feedback if they believe that any enhancement of their subject understanding will lead to performance improvements and deeper learning, even if they cannot foresee any immediate application.

The three factors are discussed in the remainder of this section.

Students’ ability to understand feedback

If feedback is to be useful, students need to understand it in the context of their assignments and the criteria used to assess them.

At a basic level, this means that feedback should meet minimal standards of legibility (if it is written) and clarity. Students are frustrated by ‘scribbles in the margin’ and ‘scruffy feedback’, but may not understand the comments even after deciphering them. Misunderstandings may occur even with legible, clearly-written feedback if students have not grasped the context for their assignment. Students sometimes have great difficulty interpreting feedback to understand what their performance gap really is. The main reason for this is a reliance in HE on written methods to describe the target performance (e.g. using assessment criteria grids), and the student’s actual performance. An underlying assumption is that performance (actual and target) can be explicitly defined. In fact, previous research has shown that attempts to define explicit criteria for different modules and forms-of-assessment are confusing for students (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2007, pp. 24-25). Our research found that few students find assessment criteria to be useful as it is traditionally provided – in written grids.

Students’ expectations of the utility of feedback

If students can anticipate ways to apply their feedback, they are more likely to engage with it. This logic is particularly relevant for instrumental learners who want to apply feedback to improve their marks. It is also relevant for students with a deep approach to their learning for whom good feedback has intrinsic value as a prompt for reflection about the disciplinary content. Opportunities to apply feedback may be within-module or from one module and another, and may relate to disciplinary content or skills, or to the method of assessment. What is key to students is their perception of the possibility of progression from one assignment to others.
Findings from our research indicated a number of barriers to students’ anticipation of progression:

i. In highly-modularised degree programmes with greater flexibility of module choice than in linear programmes, there is greater variability of students’ prior knowledge and experience. This is particularly the case for core modules which draw students from a range of subject disciplines. Modularisation tends to limit the extent to which assessment strategies across modules can be tightly coupled, and may even lead to module ‘fiefdoms’ which negate a sense (to students at least) of progression. One member of staff said that too many subjects were taught ‘in pigeon holes’ and that feedback was equally pigeonholed. Another commented that: ‘with a modular scheme there’s a student perception that this is just a one-off block – it’s unrelated to everything else I do’.

ii. If this is the case, students may see no opportunity to apply feedback from one module to the next. This perception may explain why, on some modules, few students bother to collect marked assignments.

iii. A compounding problem is that many students perceive each tutor to have unique assessment preferences resulting in inconsistency of marking. Feedback received on one module may be perceived as irrelevant for the next module if taught by a different tutor, and students may judge their time to be better spent getting to know the preferences of the new tutor.

iv. Diversity of assignments was seen as positive in providing variety, interest and greater opportunities for learning, but negative when the feedback from one assignment was not developmental in terms of subsequent modules/assignments. The problem here was the lack of opportunities to apply the learning from feedback to later assignments and modules.

On the other hand, our research identified ways to engage students with feedback which was tightly coupled to their progression, where they foresee an immediate benefit:

v. Student engagement with feedback is enhanced if they can apply formative feedback given on draft assignments before their final submission (Case study 1). In this way, progression is very visibly within-module: students engage with pre-submission feedback (including dialogue) because they can anticipate the benefit in terms of performance improvement and deeper learning.

vi. Students are more likely to engage with assessment criteria when there are phased assignments which include formative elements such as pre-submission peer reviews (investigated in Initiative 3), phased online-discussions (investigated in Initiative 4) or draft/re-draft assessment methods.

vii. Students valued the use of exemplars of previous assignments (Case study 3). Students wanted to engage in discussions about criteria and standards in relation to exemplars of work, and ‘not just download them.’ This report provides examples of within-module assessment methods in the Appendices.
**Student perception of self-efficacy**

A key feature of the transition from A-level (or equivalent) contexts to Higher Education is that students are encouraged to develop as ‘independent learners’. In relation to assessment and feedback practices, this means that feedback usually becomes less prescriptive and more developmental as students enhance their self-assessment capabilities. Ideally, students become less dependent on their tutors as they progress through HE, and are more capable of working independently or with peers.

We know from the literature that students can find this transition to be difficult, if not traumatic and occasionally over-whelming (Yorke, 2003). This is particularly so for students who hold strongly dualistic views about the nature of knowledge and the way it should be taught (Perry, 1971), or who come to HE with different expectations of teaching and learning. For example, many students in the focus groups at London Metropolitan University expressed shock about the increase in assessment demands in relation to their previous educational experience and also felt that there were not enough opportunities to build on formative feedback. One student commented that at home in the Far East Asia, academic staff ‘act like parents to babies, feeding you … and pushing you’. She felt that in contrast to her previous experience, she was being ‘pulled’ and motivated, but that the responsibility for learning was ultimately with herself as student.

Student self-efficacy is particularly relevant regarding their choice of action when ‘presented’ with feedback (where self-efficacy is defined as a judgement of one’s ability to attain certain goals). Students’ perceptions of self efficacy may, for example, influence their confidence in asking questions or engaging in a dialogue with peers or tutors about their feedback if they cannot understand it or want clarification. Self-efficacy is also relevant when students evaluate their capability in applying feedback; for example, application may require what is perceived to be a ‘difficult’ change, such as moving from a descriptive to a critically-evaluative style.

The act of ‘asking questions’ is not meant to imply that students should necessarily challenge the tutor or the feedback, although that may occur and may indicate a level of maturity. Instead, we take the view that if learning is complex, there will be times when students need clarification, or want to ask questions. This is important because one of the hallmarks of independent learners is their ability to generate appropriate questions, either to themselves in the form of self-explanatory questions (Chi, 1996), or to others.

Student willingness to question tutors is closely linked to their sense of ‘psychological safety’. Students’ sense of ‘safety’ is associated with their perceptions of the physical, social and mental learning spaces they inhabit. For example, students in Case Study 2 were reluctant to take the initiative to meet the module leader in her own office to discuss feedback, and preferred to ask brief questions when a fortuitous occasion arose (e.g. in the corridors or on one occasion in the ladies toilets). One student commented that she felt ‘uncomfortable’ dealing with some staff, especially some male staff, and preferred emailing staff rather than talking to them face-to-face or after seminars and tutorials.

Student perceptions of psychological safety is one element of the relational dimension of feedback, which is discussed in the next section.
8.4 Student willingness to engage in a dialogue about feedback is strongly influenced by the relational dimension of the feedback process

Students’ ability to ask appropriate questions indicates that they can think critically and participate in academic debates. Such questions are likely to be encouraged by tutors during class discussion, and may also occur during quiet moments of personal reflection. It should not surprise us if students sometimes want to ask about their feedback; indeed, this is a positive sign of student engagement.

However, as already indicated, students are sometimes unwilling to engage in dialogue. For example, students in case study 2 were reluctant to voluntarily ask for feedback-on-drafts, whereas almost all students in case study 1 attended the feedback-on-draft sessions which were formally timetabled and essentially ‘prescribed’. The problem is that if students remain silent, how can we know that whether or not they have understood the feedback, or whether they have briefly read it but rejected it outright, which is perhaps more problematic.

The underlying issue here is that student engagement with feedback is a relational process. Feedback not only carries content, but also carries relational information about the person giving it and the context in which the giver and receiver are situated. The relational dimension influences how students receive, interpret and evaluate feedback (as well as tutors’ intentions in giving it to students), and how students react to any questions or misunderstandings they may have.

At a contextual level, the relational dimension of feedback is shaped by broad socio-cultural norms which guide assumptions about what is ‘acceptable’. Furthermore, individual tendencies and preferences influence behaviours, emotional responses and value judgements. For example, when does ‘reasonable’ questioning by students become confrontational? And when does respectful listening become silent acquiescence? Socio-cultural and intra-personal influences are complex and enduring. Nevertheless, there are also more ‘immediate’ aspects of the relational dimension of feedback, operating at an inter-personal level between students, peers and staff.

In our research, we found that students value relationships with staff who are ‘accessible’ and ‘approachable’, and with whom they can engage in dialogue. From our student interviews, we identified that where students experience a sense of reciprocity or interest from staff, they typically feel motivated to ‘express my mind’ and ‘try my best’, or will ‘find it easier to take things on board’. However, the resource constraints currently a feature of many Universities have translated into a widespread student perception that staff do not have time to engage with them. Students interviewed for this research commented on their reluctance to question staff who are ‘too busy’ and ‘always in a hurry’ with ‘other things to do’. One student talked of her reluctance to interrupt lecturers, adding that she would ‘only go to them if really desperate’. 
Staff expressed the concern that students dis-engaged if they feel that staff have not carefully read their assignments. One interviewee had been advised to use “stock phrases” (i.e. feedback comments copied from a menu of common phrases) in order to cut his marking time, but was concerned that “students recognise the stock phrases and feel that their work hasn’t been looked at individually”. Students invariably disliked feedback tick-sheets. One commented: “the feedback is a series of ticked boxes with no commentary – standardised forms that say nothing to you”. The same student contrasted this experience with another when she received “a whole paragraph” of feedback on her coursework: it brought tears to her eyes to think that her tutor has taken the time to respond carefully to her work.

In focus, several students reported being offered individual feedback opportunities but not feeling confident enough to take them. On the other hand, some students were comfortable enough to initiate contact in order to get feedback. A key factor was the approachability of the tutor: ‘it’s more how confident I feel towards my relationship with the tutor...because if he is friendly and has a positive attitude ... then I don’t have a problem to ask.’

Our research points to a series of problems which are inhibiting opportunities for relationship-building between students and staff. Significant structural problems exist at programme and staffing levels:

i. An issue at the programme level is that large module sizes and high number of optional modules require large teaching teams. This leads to a student experience of discontinuity of teaching staff because students are taught by many different staff during their degree programme. Can staff develop a relationship with a student whom they see only once-a-week for a single module and at no other time during the student’s degree programme?

ii. A compounding problem is that many students perceive each tutor to have unique assessment preferences; this means that feedback received at the end of one module may be judged to be irrelevant for the next module.

iii. Students taught by Associate Lecturers (hourly-paid contract staff) who are not paid for ‘office hours’ have no opportunity to meet their tutors outside scheduled class-time.

iv. A policy of anonymous marking creates a break in relationships which means that staff cannot write tailored feedback to suit the developmental needs of the student.

8.5 Staff engagement with students and their feedback is constrained by resource availability and institutional policies

A strong sense of disillusionment was a key feature of the staff interviews: they were often highly committed to their students, recognising the problems of dis-engagement but not fully knowing how to engage students, or not having the resources to do so. One interviewee said she was under ‘massive time pressure’ and had been working 70 hours a week to cover her teaching, administration and research commitments; she was now suffering health problems. Many staff commented on the difficulties of creating engaging feedback or talking to students about their work in the time allotted to them under workload planning frameworks.
One said he could only give ‘approximate’ comments on students’ work because he could only spend 20 minutes reading, assessing and feeding back on a script – otherwise he would have to ‘wave goodbye to really serious chunks of time’.

Although students perceive academic staff as ‘busy’, this label belies the fact that many staff are student-centred, and care deeply about their students. During our Strand 1 interviews with academic staff at the three partner institutions, we gained a strong sense of disillusionment from staff about their lack of opportunity to engage with students. A key factor was the perceived lack of time for dialogue, as well as a general sense of the pressure of time. For example, the tight timetabling of activities meant that students and staff had few windows of opportunity in which to meet outside scheduled classes. Although our staff interviewees were a self-selected sample and therefore likely to be enthusiastic about student learning, the concern about the negative impact of resource constraints on student-staff engagement have been identified elsewhere (eg Gibbs and Simpson, 2004), which suggests that it is a widespread and serious issue.

Institutional or discipline-level policies were influential in framing staff engagement. For example, associate (hourly-paid) lecturers at one of the partner institutions are paid to provide written feedback, but not to talk to students outside class-time because their contract does not include ‘office hours’. This means that students on large modules (which typically rely heavily on associate lecturers) have limited opportunities for verbal feedback.

8.6 Students need guidance as they transition to an HE environment

Students come to Higher Education with different experiences and expectations. A-level students from the UK, for example, may be accustomed to receiving regular and prescriptive feedback on their assignments before final submission, and may be perplexed if no pre-submission feedback is given on their drafts once they enter Higher Education. On the other hand, some international students have experienced a didactic style of education and therefore have very little experience of engaging in a dialogue with their tutors, for example about the meaning of assessment criteria or the feedback they receive on completed assignments. In many institutions, the first year does not contribute to students’ degree classification. Several members of staff commented that when students learn that their grades do not ‘count’ in their first year, they learn how to play the system very quickly and may see no point in engaging with the feedback.

For many students entering Higher Education, the concept of ‘feedback’ is interpreted in a rather conservative manner - often understood to be no more than a written explanation of a grade. Students interviewed were sometimes rather negative about their experiences of feedback, finding it ‘intimidating’, ‘distant’, and ‘impersonal’, and/or experiencing it as a one-way communication or monologue. The act of asking follow-up questions was often problematic and considered by some students as a sign of weakness, not strength. This was especially the case with some international students, but also sometimes with UK students accustomed to prescriptive guidance from their school teachers.
Evidence of student dissatisfaction with feedback (National Student Survey, 2007) has already spurred action in some HE institutions. However, as senior managers, academic and support staff grapple with the problems of student engagement, there is a risk that time and money will be wasted promulgating feedback practices which are ineffective. We know from the literature that student experiences of feedback are varied and all-too-often rather negative: to give students more of the same is not necessarily the answer. As Gibbs and Simpson have argued, feedback that is ‘lovingly crafted and provided promptly’, may still be uncollected or unread by students if they do not see its value (2004, p. 20). In the current context of limited institutional resources, time and money should be better spent.

Our research shows that change is possible. Students can be encouraged to engage with feedback in ways that result in improvements in their satisfaction and their performance. Interventions at the module, programme and institutional level mean that feedback is more likely to be engaged with and applied, rather than ‘thrown in the bin’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Furthermore, the involvement of staff and students in these interventions will facilitate better awareness and understanding of the nature of feedback and the options available to enhance student engagement.

Drawing on the findings from this research, we make the following recommendations for enhancing student engagement with feedback:

9.1 Create an appropriate environment which encourages student engagement with feedback

The premise guiding this project is that in an HE context, assessment drives learning. By this we mean that students are socialised in various ways to engage with the requirement of their assignments, but that this behaviour may over-ride the pleasure of learning for its own sake, or may direct students’ attention away from assessment activity if ‘grades don’t count’ as is common in the induction year.

The ‘culture of assessment’ is not homogenous across institutions, however. The particular ways in which students engage with feedback are shaped by structural/environmental influences such as disciplinary norms, institutional policies, resource allocation practices and assessment regimes.

i. Build awareness that even though the institutional and disciplinary environment cannot easily be changed, it is important that staff are sensitised to the affect which environmental influences have on student engagement with feedback. For example, if first-year grades do not contribute to degree classifications, students may ‘learn’ that they do not need to bother with assignments except to achieve a bare pass.

ii. Build awareness among staff of the relational dimension (and not just the content dimension) of feedback. Facilitate relationship-building between staff and students, and between students and other students, and limit the structural barriers to relationship-building.

iii. Consider implementation of the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2007) or an equivalent instrument to measure students’ learning responses to programme-level assessment environments.
9.2 Integrate feedback methods and practices with strategies at the module, programme, and assessment levels

Assessment-and-feedback should not be treated as bounded activities which are designed independently of other elements of the curriculum, but instead should be incorporated into module, programme and assessment-level strategies. Some illustrative examples for implementation are:

i. At modular level, include opportunities for students to receive pre-submission feedback on their (draft) assignments which allows for discussion of the meaning of assessment criteria. An added benefit is that students tend to start working early rather than at the ‘last minute’, because of the staged structure of the assignment. For example, pre-submission feedback may be provided:

- By peers during peer-review exercises conducted before final submission, as a way of developing self-assessment skills through assessing the work of others (Case study 5; Appendix 2);
- By tutors giving generic (non-personalised) feedback to the student cohort based on an assessment of a sample of draft assignments (Appendix 2);
- By tutors having short time-tabled conversations with students about specific aspects of their draft assignments (Case study 1).
- By students working independently during self-assessment activities (which may be followed by other forms of formative assessment and feedback)
- By tutors and peers giving informal feedback on short in-class presentations at the beginning of class-time.

ii. At modular level, provide feedback which feeds forward to future modules. For example:

- By students independently during self-assessment activities; for example where students reflect on their interpretation of the feedback and their ‘performance gap’, and create an action plan outlining how they will build on the feedback in their future work
- By tutors making linkages between the current and future modules (note that this depends on the existence of an integrated programme structure, and/or staff knowledge about the content and assessment strategies of many modules).
- By tutors commenting on academic literacy themes which progress towards programme-level outcomes.

iii. At programme level, students (and staff) need to see that assessment is progressive so that they perceive the value of formative feedback between modules. This may be achieved by:

- Duplicating the formative assessment of programme-level outcomes across multiple modules. For students, duplication of formative assessment provides opportunities for improvement-through-practice, although excessive duplication may lead to a perception of ‘assessment overload’.
iv. At programme level, consider implementation of integrative assessments. For example:

- Integrative assessments may be designed to assess two or more module-level outcomes in a single module
- ‘Capstone’ assessments may be designed to assess programme-level outcomes at the end of students’ degree programme.

v. As part of institutional or school-level assessment strategies:

- Provide mechanisms by which personal tutors give formative feedback to their students based on a review of each student’s feedback from multiple assignments and modules (see also Duncan, 2007).
- Consider whether an institutional policy of anonymous marking may in fact create a break in the tutor-student relationship which prevents tutors from providing tailored formative feedback to suit the developmental needs of students.

9.3 Recognise that feedback operates – and may be delivered – in multiple ways and should be adapted to suit students’ levels of engagement, their prior knowledge, and their epistemological orientations

Feedback may be given in multiple ways, and may be conceptualised as a product (e.g. a feedback tick-sheet) or as a process (e.g. a conversation conducted over a few weeks about draft assignments). There are many options available to staff and students, and the number of options is growing as technology offers more permutations around modality, timing, type of interaction and so on. Whilst the purpose of this project is not to document all possibilities, it is important to highlight that staff should make informed decisions when selecting the type of feedback appropriate for any given assessment point.

Some illustrative examples for implementation (with more examples from the project website):

i. Use diagnostic exercises-with-feedback for students at various induction points to indicate the resources suitable for development.

ii. Use a full range of modalities when giving feedback.

- Use written, explicit feedback when appropriate, for example when correcting errors, explaining technical points, or giving explicit suggestions.
- Supplement written feedback with dialogue – by using in-class discussions of exemplars, peer-review discussions supported by tutors, learning through ‘learning sets’ for example. Dialogue is appropriate when written feedback cannot fully communicate tacit understandings about disciplinary content and academic literacy skills.
• Use non-written feedback when appropriate in order to engage students or communicate more expressively, or in situations where written feedback is not time-effective. For example, audio feedback can often communicate more information (and in more emotional and supportive tones) than written feedback in a given period of time allocated to tutors for marking/feedback.

• Use computer-aided assessment and computer-generated feedback when topics can be reduced to single-solution questions, and where the immediacy of feedback is important.

9.4 Prepare students for engaging with feedback and dialogue

Given the range of pre-HE experiences and expectations about the learning process, many students need preparation and guidance to enable them to engage with, and gain most benefit from, the assignment-and-feedback processes characteristic of Higher Education. In particular, students need guidance on the different forms of feedback, how to ask for it, how to engage with it and so on.

Preparation for students is particularly important given that students often do not recognise feedback for what it is – which no doubt influences the way students rate ‘assessment and feedback’ in the National Student Survey. As evidenced in the Initiative conducted by University of Sunderland, one-off events are insufficient to generate significant attitudinal change.

As a broader point, students may need guidance to make the transition from teaching-centred methods to student-centred approaches which foster independent learning. Figure 3 in the Appendices gives one example of a programme-level strategy for preparing students for assessment and feedback – not only in their first year, but throughout their degree programme as assessment methods become more complex and integrated in preparation for employment.

Some illustrative examples for implementation:

i. For students transitioning to HE, develop an induction strategy which helps students become aware of, and understand, the assessment practices of the School or Faculty. Induction may also be relevant for credit-entry students moving from one institution to another, particularly if the assessment cultures are considerably different.

ii. At programme-level, develop an assessment-and-feedback strategy which supports students’ progression with a range of assessment methods appropriate to their discipline.

iii. Develop students’ self-assessment capabilities through peer and self-assessment so that they rely to a greater extent on their own critical faculties, and less on the assessment of others.

iv. At module-level, communicate the purpose and nature of assessment, including the different forms of feedback available to students (for example, oral in class; written on assignments)
9.5 Prepare staff to give feedback

Academic staff bring to their teaching a wide range of, sometimes contradictory, views on assessment and feedback. These views are usually based on long-standing experience, and draw on personal experiences as learners as well as the practices of other teaching staff. There is some evidence from our staff interviews of a defensiveness about encouraging dialogue about feedback, for fear that students come to ‘challenge the mark’ rather than for advice about ongoing development.

Some illustrative examples for implementation:

i. Staff may value and benefit from professional development activities which focus on the role of assessment and feedback in student learning.

ii. Encourage mentoring of new staff.

iii. Encourage staff to see feedback-preparation as a developmental activity, whereby the issues and problems featured in feedback can shape future teaching activity

iv. Support student-voice events where students and staff can come together and talk about feedback-related issues in arenas other than the formal classroom environment.
Section 10
Integrating formative assessment and feedback into module structures: examples of module design

The findings outlined above indicate a need for re-orientation which reduces the summative assessment load of individual modules to allow a rebalancing of resources towards formative assessments.

There are clearly resource constraints which impinge on the design of assessment and feedback strategies at module and programme level. Our research investigated the use of a number of feedback approaches that support formative assessment whilst recognising resource constraints: these include the use of generic feedback, in-class assessments, posters, peer review and self-assessment methods. These cases are documented in the Case Study and Cascade Partner Initiatives report.

Figures 4 to 6 in the Appendices provide examples of how formative assessment can be designed into the module structure. Figure 4 illustrates the use of peer-review as a method of encouraging students to articulate and compare their understanding of assessment criteria. Figure 5 illustrates the use of exemplars as another mechanism for encouraging dialogue between students and the tutor about assessment criteria. In Figure 6, the assessment and feedback structure is designed to encourage students’ ability to critique their own work, and to articulate how they have used cohort (generic) feedback to improve their work.
11 Conclusion

The complexity of student engagement with formative feedback is perhaps unsurprising given that ‘feedback’ is not simply a product, but is better conceptualised as a process within teaching and learning. As such, there is no quick-fix solution to improving student engagement; and no ‘one size fits all’ intervention.

However, we hope in section 9 to have identified some of the key points of leverage where interventions may have greatest impact. Furthermore, section 10 (with the associated appendices) offers suggestions for integrating formative assessment and feedback into module designs.

Our case studies – Strand 3 of the four strands of research activity – identify ways in which student engagement with feedback can be improved in a resource-constrained environment, and these cases are discussed in detail in our case study report. The Cascade Partner Initiatives – Strand 4 – augment the case studies by replicating some approaches or investigating further some of the issues arising from the earlier cases, such as the need for student preparation.
Section 12

References


Supplementary to this document are the four reports on each strand of research activity, together with the literature review. These reports are available from the project website:

Report on the seven case studies conducted at the three partner institutions: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/eswaf/Case+Studies

Report on the five initiatives conducted at the five cascade partner institutions: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/eswaf/Cascade+Partner+Initiatives

Report on the student/staff interviews at the three partner institutions: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/eswaf/Resources

Report on the student questionnaire conducted at the three partner institutions: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/eswaf/Resources

Literature review, 2005: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/eswaf/Resources

The appendices in the next section give examples of ways to prepare students for Higher Education, and ways to design module-level assessment-and-feedback strategies which do not increase resource demands.
13.1 Appendix 1: Preparing and developing students for assessment and feedback at programme level

Students come to Higher Education with varied experiences and expectations. They need guidance to make the transition from teaching-centred methods to student-centred approaches which foster independent learning. Figure 3 illustrates some of the ways in which students might be prepared for assessment and feedback throughout their degree programme.

Figure 3: Preparing and developing students for assessment and feedback in Higher Education
13.2 Appendix 2: Three examples of formative assessment designs

The following examples illustrate ways to incorporate formative assessment into the module structure.

Note that in the diagrams, the box indicating the timing of assignment hand-back straddles the end-of-term/semester to indicate that assignments may be given back in-class, or after the module ends.

13.3 Using peer review to encourage students to develop their understanding of assessment criteria

Working with students prior to submission of their assignment

- [Approx. week 2] Facilitate a discussion with students on the assessment criteria and standards for their assignment, using exemplar assignments where appropriate. Explain the process of peer review, including the use of a review sheet. Organise students into groups of three, and encourage a sense of commitment to the future peer review sessions.

- [Mid module] Ask students to bring their draft assignments to the peer review session. You may prefer students to review each others’ outline plans, or other forms of draft work, to reduce the likelihood of plagiarism.

Engaging students in the peer review workshop 2 to 3 weeks before submission

- Remind students about the assessment criteria and standards. In the triad-groups, ask students to review each others’ work using the review sheet, and discuss their comments with each other. Encourage students to give constructive, formative feedback (for example, ‘here are three things you did well...; and here are some areas for improvement...’).

- As tutor, move between groups to offer guidance and clarification. This is important if students are unsure of the credibility and validity of peer comments.

- Ask students to reflect on the peer review process, and to revise and improve their assignments. You may wish students to submit a reflective commentary as part of their assignment.
Engaging students with feedback on their final assignments

- Collect, assess and mark the final assignments. Provide personalised feedback as well as generic feedback for discussion with the student cohort, either in-class or using an online discussion board.
- Invite questions or dialogue to encourage students to engage with the feedback.

Figure 4: Using peer-review to encourage students to develop their understanding of assessment criteria
13.4 Using exemplar assignments to encourage dialogue between students and the tutor about assessment criteria

What are exemplars?

- Exemplars are ‘key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence. The exemplars are not standards themselves but are indicative of them ... they specify standards implicitly’ (Sadler, 1987).
- Exemplars may be complete assignments, or excerpts from those assignment. Excerpts are useful for providing a focus on specific issues (such as the format of an executive summary), but cannot give students a holistic sense of what a good assignment ‘looks like’.
- Exemplars may be authentic pieces of student work, or may be (re)constructed by staff. A benefit of constructed exemplars is that the tutor can ensure that any teaching points are as transparent as possible.
- Exemplars may be annotated with feedback to help students understand what tutors look for, and to build their self-assessment skills.

Why use exemplars to communicate assessment criteria and standards?

- Many HE institutions use written criteria grids to try to explicate the way student assignments will be assessed and marked. Grids typically state each criterion in general terms, and define the manifestations of each criterion at different ‘standard’ (eg A vs. B+) or levels (eg 3rd year undergraduate vs. 1st year masters).
- Many assessment criteria in the social sciences relate to concepts which cannot be fully defined in an explicit manner (such as ‘critical reasoning’). To become meaningful, these criteria must be interpreted.
- Tacit interpretations of assessment criteria by markers are likely to be consistent if staff are members of an academic community which engages in regular dialogue about student assignments and associated criteria.
- Students, who are peripheral members of the HE academic community, are excluded from this dialogue for reasons of student confidentiality, unless shown de-identified exemplars.

Working with students prior to submission of their assignment

- (Approx. week 2) Facilitate an initial discussion with students about the assessment criteria and standards for their assignment, using criteria grids or other documentation.
- (Mid module) Provide students with sample assignments annotated with feedback (for example, one good; one mediocre), with the relevant assignment brief and assessment criteria grid. Students’ forthcoming assignment should be similar in format to that of the exemplars.
• For each exemplar, ask students to assess the quality of the work, and award a grade.

• Discuss students’ evaluation of each exemplar, and ask students to justify the grade they have awarded with reference to the assessment criteria. Use the discussions to reveal students’ assumptions, and to deepen students’ sensitivity to the meaning of the assessment criteria and standards.

• Discuss feedback annotations (if included) on each exemplar as a way to clarify student understanding of the ‘performance gap’ between what was asked for in the assignment brief, and the work illustrated in the exemplar. Elaborate on any feedback terminology which is unclear to students.

Engaging students with feedback on their final assignments

• Collect, assess and mark the final assignments. Provide personalised feedback as well as generic feedback for discussion with the student cohort (in-class, or by discussion board or email).

• Invite questions or dialogue to allow students to engage with feedback if they wish to do so.

Figure 5: Using exemplars to encourage dialogue between students and the tutor about assessment criteria
13.5 Using generic (cohort) feedback on draft assignments to enable students to critique and improve their own work

Working with students prior to submission of their assignment

- (Approx. week 2) Facilitate a discussion with students on the assessment criteria and standards for their assignment.
- (Optional) Where appropriate, use exemplars to encourage dialogue between students and tutors about the meaning of assessment criteria and standards.
- Ask students to submit a draft of their assignment. There are a number of options for organising this process. Submission may be voluntary, or a module requirement (without marks); and submissions may be anonymous or identified. Anonymity may allay potential student concerns about revealing poor quality drafts.

Provide feedback-on-drafts based on a sample of assignments

- Assess a sample of draft assignments, and prepare generic (cohort) feedback. Where possible, suggest questions which need to be considered to help students improve their assignment.
- Discuss drafts with students, linking feedback with the assessment criteria to help students understand the meaning of the criteria and standards.

Engaging students with feedback on their final assignments

- (Optional) Ask students to submit a reflective commentary on how they have used the generic cohort feedback.
- Collect, assess and mark the final assignments.
- Give minimal formative feedback (unless there are resources to assess student work more than once in a single module), and invite questions or dialogue to allow students to engage with the feedback.
Figure 6: Facilitating student self-evaluation based on generic cohort feedback

IN-CLASS ACTIVITY

1. Students draft and submit individual assignments
2. Tutor marks sample of assignments and prepares generic feedback
3. In-class discussion of generic cohort feedback based on coursework sample
4. Students rewrite and submit individual assignments with reflective commentary on how they have incorporated the generic feedback
5. Tutor assesses assignments
6. Tutor hands back assignments with minimal formative feedback

OUT OF CLASS ACTIVITY

1. Students draft and submit individual assignments
2. Tutor marks sample of assignments and prepares generic feedback
3. In-class discussion of generic cohort feedback based on coursework sample
4. Students rewrite and submit individual assignments with reflective commentary on how they have incorporated the generic feedback
5. Tutor assesses assignments
6. Tutor hands back assignments with minimal formative feedback

Module timeline (not to scale)

Week 1
Assignment point
Week 12
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