

WHAT MAKES GOOD FEEDBACK GOOD?

Understanding and enhancing student
perceptions of assessment feedback



Is there anything more we can do to encourage student engagement and improve satisfaction with assessment feedback?

Despite a great deal of attention on improving the timing and technical aspects of feedback artefacts, high levels of satisfaction in student surveys remain largely elusive. This may be because the comments made on students' assignments are only a small part of the complex phenomenon of good feedback. Attention to the many, complex influences on student perceptions of feedback can help tutors diagnose problems and improve student satisfaction. This leaflet attempts to consider this multifaceted set of influences and sets out ways to plan for and provide good feedback.

Pay attention to three areas that influence student perceptions of feedback:

1

Attend to more than the quality and delivery of the feedback

- Recognise that while technical aspects such as clarity, detail, and precision are important they are not sufficient for students to perceive feedback as good.
- Acknowledge individuality of each student's specific work, and note that feedback writing 'shortcuts'¹ can undermine this so use judiciously.
- Demonstrate clear engagement with, and consideration of, student work. This reciprocity acknowledges the effort and investment students put into their work. They are likely to be dissatisfied with impersonal, pro forma feedback on a piece of work into which they put a lot of effort.

2

Lay the building blocks: perceptions of feedback are formed well before the feedback moment

- Pay close attention to assignment design. If students see the challenges of an assignment as illegitimate and/or irrelevant, they are more likely to resent criticism in the feedback. The purpose, requirements and expectations should be clear but that does not mean that assessment should be without complexity.
- Situate your feedback in an ongoing dialogue with students about assessment learning outcomes. This dialogue will support their ability to evaluate their work and clarify the purpose of feedback (especially if you will use peer feedback).
- Ensure that formative feedback or informal advice is consistent with marking and feedback on the summative assessment. Students find it extremely frustrating and unfair when the feedback appears to contradict earlier advice especially if they think this difference has affected their mark.
- Ensure the final feedback and mark is provided by the person who briefed the student or provided formative feedback. If this is not possible, ensure that any other markers are enculturated into the assessment design, learning outcomes, and pedagogic ethos of the institution, department, or module and participates in extensive calibration of marks.

3

Work with students to support their engagement with feedback

- Facilitate effective self-evaluation² to help students develop realistic expectations of marks and feedback. Be aware that lower than expected marks create a demand for detailed feedback that justifies the mark.
- Recognise that students' different understandings of the nature of knowledge (epistemologies), motivations, resilience, beliefs and assessment literacy³ influence how they respond to feedback. Use pre-feedback dialogue to shape students' expectations and responses to feedback.
- Tutors can develop students' epistemological sophistication through discussions about the purpose of feedback. See <https://berry4.typeform.com/to/ZTt4rq> for one helpful resource.

1 Such as use of statement banks, tick box feedback sheets etc.

2 E.g. Support students in understanding assessment criteria and then require students to regularly provide evaluation of their work for the marker to comment on.

3 See back cover of this leaflet.

Taking an overview

Providing feedback that both supports learning and is considered good by students can seem elusive, with so many influences on student perceptions some of them seemingly at odds with enshrined pedagogic advice. The influences are varied but not individually causal and cannot be prioritised. Nor are they mutually exclusive; there are strong interrelationships between the influences. For example, preparation for assessment can influence student expectations, and individuality of feedback may relate to assessment design. The influences on perception are context dependent and are well beyond the feedback artefact itself. As staff make decisions about where to focus their time and effort in providing good feedback, it is important for them to take a much broader perspective on what makes a difference. An overemphasis on technical factors at the expense of contextual elements such as good teacher-student relationships risks missing the point: a good learning experience.⁴

Improvements are likely to come through multifaceted approaches – for example involving developing students as well as developing teachers, changing employment practices as well as changing quality assurance policy, through redesigning assessment patterns within course units as well as across degree programmes, and so on. The arena that, perhaps offers greatest unexploited scope for improvement concerns student learning development and their assessment literacy. Successful students use feedback differently and more effectively (without the context or the feedback changing) and it is possible to change how students perceive feedback and what they do with it. However, increasing assessment literacy⁵ among students by introducing different perspectives of feedback requires a shared assessment literacy among staff.

4 Also see Dean, A. and Gibbs, P. (2015) Student satisfaction or happiness?: A preliminary rethink of what is important in the student experience, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 23(1), pp.5-19

5 See Price, M., Rust, C., O'Donovan, B., Handley, K. and Bryant, R. (2012). *Assessment literacy: The foundation for improving student learning*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.



ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange) is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) set up in 2005 with a £4.5 million award from HEFCE in recognition of good practice based on pedagogic research into aspects of assessment. Its work continues in conjunction with the Pedagogy Research Centre based in the Faculty of Business at Oxford Brookes University.

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