



Creative analysis of NSS data and collaborative research to inform good practice in assessment feedback

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Abstract

Funded by the Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP), this research project sought to identify student and academic staff perspectives as to what constitutes effective assessment feedback practice. It was, in part, a subject level exploration in response to the fact that assessment feedback has consistently emerged as an area of concern to students completing National Student Satisfaction Surveys. Using mixed research methods, including drawing on data from the 2009 National Student Survey, the research was undertaken across SWAP constituency subject-areas in three universities. Whilst supportive of previous research reports (for example, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2004, McDowell 2008, McDowell and Sambell 1999, Crook et al 2006), findings from this project particularly highlight the central significance to students of the quality of their relationships with staff. Indeed, other generic factors that are often argued to impact on assessment feedback such as timeliness and consistency appear to be contingent on the quality of staff-student relationships within specific departmental context.

Key findings

In terms of improving student experiences of assessment feedback:

- Preparing students to understand, receive and make the most of assessment feedback takes time.
- Students appreciate opportunities for individual discussion of their feedback ideally from a member of staff who has a good relationship with them and understands their individual learning needs.
- Student take up of feedback often depends on the way it is communicated. It is affected by the perceived care taken to personalise the message as well as the quality of the staff student relationship.
- When students do take up one to one feedback sessions they generally view them as positive experiences.
- When informing students about the assessment requirements and submission dates, it helps to provide clear indications of when and how feedback will be provided as well as the roles and responsibilities of both staff and students.

- Students are less supportive of group feedback sessions than staff. Personalised communication is important to students and needs further development.
- Programmes should be designed so that there are early opportunities for formative feedback.
- University support for academic writing can provide students with impartial and confidential help in understanding and using their feedback and staff with additional input.

In terms of effective use of NSS data:

- Effective curriculum development in response to NSS findings requires that NSS data is provided to staff at a level that matches the programmes as they are delivered.
- A broader understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of comparing NSS data over time and between departments is needed.
- Wider access to qualitative comments from the NSS data could inform the interpretation of the quantitative results.
- Broader contextualisation and consideration of NSS data alongside other sources of student feedback (e.g. internal module evaluations, staff/student committees, student focus groups) is needed to develop a holistic approach to student feedback.

Methodology

This study adopted a largely qualitative approach, set alongside quantitative data from both the NSS and a student questionnaire, for demographic purposes and to establish patterns and trends in perspectives. Qualitative research is ‘a situated activity ... that describe(s) routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 3), where ‘the emphasis ... is upon words rather than numbers’ and ‘textual analysis predominates’ (Morrison 2002: 19-21). For this study, the qualitative data on student perspectives was collected from the NSS survey, a questionnaire, focus groups and interviews, and thematically analysed in order to identify and explore in depth the meanings that individuals attached to their experience.

The sources of data were therefore:

1. The 2008 National Student Survey for each institution
2. A student questionnaire conducted through SurveyMonkey for each institution
3. Focus groups with students
4. Interviews with academic staff at each site.

Ethical approval for the study was received from each of the three universities and the research conducted in accordance with their requirements. All participants were assured that the data generated by the study would be held confidentially and anonymously. Participants in focus groups and interviews were asked for their consent to being recorded and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Background

'assessment processes in the UK are generally sound, but there is evidence that there is some concern in some areas of assessment and feedback practices in UK Higher Education'.
(The Higher Education Academy, HEA)

This is how the Higher Education Academy summarises the assessment and feedback results from the 2009 National Student Survey on its website. In particular, the Academy goes on to note, the results indicate that only 65% of those responding, agree that their experience of assessment and feedback is positive (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/assessment>). However to date it has been somewhat unclear as to how this translates into local practice and student experiences within social work and social policy programmes of study.

In response, this report offers an analysis of student and staff perceptions of assessment feedback within an institutional and subject context. What makes the research reported on herein distinctive is that it conducted a comparative analysis of current practices in assessment feedback across cognate subject areas in three HEIs. Given the prominence NSS data is currently given at national level in determining debates about assessment and feedback, the report also includes examples and suggestions for ways in which social policy and social work academics might make the most effective use of that data. These examples come from the partners in the project.

HEI Context

The three institutions who took part in this research project came together as the result of opportunity sampling, being those available and interested in participating at the time the study commenced. Each participating institution differs greatly in size and course provision. The University of Portsmouth, on the south coast of England has over 3,000 staff and over 19,000 students, including 3,000 from over 100 countries. City University, based in the heart of the capital London, supports nearly 24,000 students from over 156 different countries. The project leader, University of Lincoln, was the smallest of the sample institutions with nearly 10,000 full-time and part-time undergraduate students, supported by approximately 1,200 staff. Equally important to note are the differences in subject level teaching, learning and assessment. Each university in the study offered students different mixes and combinations of social work, social policy, criminology and other cognate social science teaching. In addition, one partner institution had found significant differences in student feedback between the same programme delivered at different campuses.

Despite these caveats and significant contextual differences project partners were keen to identify practices they could share and develop. Indeed they welcomed the opportunity to drill down and supplement data in an effort to find the local factors that were affecting the student experience of assessment feedback.

Two of the three lead co-ordinators for the project were based in teaching and learning units working closely with cognate subject areas in the social sciences (criminology, social work, social policy, psychology). The study benefited from its contextualisation within such support networks

in two ways. Firstly co-ordinators provided hands on experience and examples of supporting departments in their responses to policy driven agendas. Secondly they brought to the table a wealth of knowledge about earlier research and literature on the subject of assessment and feedback (see sources at the end of this report). Whilst it is not possible or desirable to devote a large segment of this report to those sources, this preceding work is recognised as underpinning the current study.

Using the National Student Survey: issues and possible solutions

Classification of Subject areas

NSS results are publicly disseminated according to subject areas as defined by the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) classification. In order to consider the experience of students within the SWAP constituency, national results can be analysed at the higher level 1 category of 'Social Studies', or at the lower level 2 sub-categories of 'Social Work (SW) and 'Sociology, Social Policy, Politics and Anthropology' (SSPA).

This study focussed on the three questions that relate most directly to feedback, Qs 7-9. The table below displays national results for these three questions for these subject areas in comparison with the sector-wide results for all subjects :

Table 1: Summary of responses to Q7, 8 and 9

	% agree 2009			
	Whole sector	Social Studies (L1)	SW (L2)	SSPA (L2)
Q7 – Feedback on my work has been prompt	57%	59%	59%	59%
Q8 – I have received detailed comments on my work	62%	64%	71%	67%
Q9 – Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand	57%	56%	61%	57%

Table 1 suggests that Social Studies students generally have higher than average levels of agreement with questions 7 and 8. The sub-categories of Social Work and Social Policy score

particularly well, for example, on question 8 regarding the detail of comments on work. However this is not the whole story.

The publication of results according to JACS classifications is designed to enable direct comparisons between institutions. However, it can also mitigate against the usefulness of the data for internal quality enhancement processes, especially when there is a loose match between JACS subject classifications and actual programmes. Within the SWAP constituency this does not tend to affect Social Work, which exists as a separate subject area at JACS level 2 within the broad 'Social Studies' category. On the other hand Social Policy programmes are grouped together at level 2 under 'Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology'. There is a particular issue with programmes in Criminology, which until now has not been identified at all in the JACS classification, even at level 3. In two of the participating institutions this caused some difficulty, as Criminology is a major programme, and of course this defeats the primary purpose of the NSS which is to provide meaningful and comparative data to prospective students.

It was clear from our analysis of interviews with staff teaching at our three HEIs that the NSS was having a significant impact on their institutions and was a major driver in improving practices, particular regarding feedback on assessment.

"There has been an increasing emphasis on the quality of the feedback and while there is still some variance it is generally good and has received an appropriately positive response from the students."

"There's certainly been an impetus to change. We'd been going quite well, then took a drop in the scores.[...] there was a big drive to see that it didn't happen again."

It was also clear that the way in which NSS data is distributed and interpreted differed widely between institutions. When attempting to place NSS scores in context, for example, there are, broadly speaking, four possible forms of comparative analysis that can be performed: comparison against previous years; comparison against other subjects within the institution; comparison across the sector; comparison with institutions perceived as 'similar' or 'competitors'. If the different levels of reporting (JACS levels 1, 2 and 3, plus programme level reporting) are included, as well as the two different numerical methods of reporting (by percentage or likert scale) there is clear scope for confusion and misinterpretation. Unsurprisingly, what was important to staff in all three HEIs was that they had access to data at the level most relevant to them, so that they can identify with the data and take ownership of associated action plans.

Possible solution: using the departmental field

When supplying data to HESA on students eligible for the NSS, many institutions now use the optional 'department' field to enable more useful internal reporting of results. The name 'department' is indicative only, and in practice the field can be used by an institution to include any field which will help locally in the disaggregation of data. Although not included in the public

reporting of results, the field is used for the internal dissemination of results via the password-protected website. For several years the University of Lincoln has used this field to allocate students to a specific award, a practice which is increasingly widespread across the sector as its value is appreciated. This enables internal dissemination of results, including the qualitative student comments collected by the survey, at a level which is meaningful within the institutional context. Being meaningful at local level is critically important if NSS data is to be used effectively for internal enhancement purposes. Providing award level data enables staff to identify with the results and take ownership of associated action plans.



Benefits of departmental level disaggregation

Departmental level disaggregation and analysis can prove useful. In one of the institutions participating in this study, for example, the social work team, through its subject teaching and learning committee, had undertaken significant work to respond to the NSS data and their local module student evaluation feedback. The NSS data had been disaggregated to reflect the specific feedback at programme level. The team then identified consistency of feedback as being a particular developmental issue; this was addressed in two ways. Firstly, the teaching and learning lead and chair of the subject committee, drafted a revised feedback sheet proforma, with detailed guidance about making grading decisions and giving attention to assessment criteria. Following consultation across the team and resultant further developments, the proforma and process were adopted on all undergraduate modules on the programme. Secondly to support this development, the team held an assessment and feedback workshop, to explore their newly developed guidance and ensure, as far as possible, consistency of understanding and implementation. This approach is now fully embedded in the team's practice, with the guidance being made available to all new teaching staff as they join the programme.

Student and Staff perceptions of assessment feedback

Although the NSS data was an important component of our research study the main aim of the collaborative project was to identify and disseminate knowledge about effective assessment feedback practice within the Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP) subject constituency. In particular the study sought to investigate the following questions:

1. What perspectives do students commonly hold regarding assessment feedback?
2. What perspectives do academic staff¹ commonly hold regarding assessment feedback?
3. What factors impact on the quality and provision of assessment feedback?
4. What is the impact of NSS data on academic departments?

¹ The terms 'academic staff', 'lecturer' and 'tutor' are used interchangeably for the study, referring generically to a person or people providing feedback.

This section brings together the total data gathered from the three universities in order to ascertain common or unique perspectives and provide answers to the four research questions that the study sought to investigate. Although the data were gathered from varying numbers and types of respondents across the sites (e.g. more PhD tutors at City University, more participants overall at the University of Lincoln, and more third year students at Portsmouth), nevertheless several strong patterns of perspective across the sites emerged. By cross-referencing the findings from the qualitative data from staff and students with the NSS scores of each institution, we argue it is possible to develop some insight into some of the key factors that impact on performance in this area.

a) Communicating feedback

The data from this study suggests that feedback is most often delivered in the form of written comment on written papers coupled with typed or hand-written feedback sheets. Students do not like receiving simple tick-boxes or brief comments at the beginning or end of a paper. Instead they expect detailed written comment on their scripts, where comments are directly tied to particular parts of a paper. In addition, they expect the option of follow-up one-to-one oral feedback sessions where comments can be further explained. Opportunities for one to one feedback varied immensely between lecturers, programmes and universities. Some lecturers seemed to have an 'open door', others offered individual tutorials only to students who had failed, and others were said never to have offered such a tutorial. The following comments from interviews with staff represent generally acknowledged good practice, but also highlight the associated resource implications.

“My students all get an annotated script and a separate marksheet. Any failing students are also offered a tutorial and I have seen them improve. Other students can have a tutorial if they ask.”

“In terms of my own practice, the introduction of personal feedback sessions has been appreciated enormously by students and you can deliver a lot more than in writing but it's very labour-intensive.”

“While lecturers talk positively about the benefits of group feedback sessions, students generally place less value on them. There is also some ambivalence around the use of alternative modes of feedback such as audio and video.”

“Electronic feedback appeared to enjoy a mixed reception at this time, but it is possible, that these responses depended on the level of prior exposure to such feedback.”

“We've been using Blackboard effectively...for feedback prior to assignment submission and electronic comments on scripts. It's good, but it's very time-consuming doing the comments this way.”

“Both parties appreciate the potential for improved legibility, while the practice of typing comments on scripts improves the usefulness of feedback as students see the direct relevance of the comment. Lecturers however feel that this is a very time-consuming process.”



Dealing with student expectation

In one of the institutions participating in this study the Department of Policy Studies created a PowerPoint presentation about the roles and responsibilities of staff and student regarding feedback which colleagues could easily embed in lectures or seminars. They also added guidance about the purpose of feedback to their coursework presentation and marking guide. Students were offered the opportunity to have one-to-one feedback sessions with staff about their work and feedback. Although time consuming, the one to one sessions were useful ways of finding out more about how students were approaching their assignments and interpreting feedback. Staff also found that the short presentation was a good way of sharing generic examples of feedback as well as providing guidance on how to use it.

A case study detailing this practice can be accessed via www.swap.ac.uk/resources/publs/casestudies/cslmccanngsaunders.html

b) Quality and consistency of feedback

The quality of feedback was clearly the issue of most concern to students. The opinion was expressed strongly that feedback should indicate not only what was good and what was inadequate about a piece of work, but what might have been done to enhance it. While a few students said that any feedback at all was useful, the majority felt that it was only useful when the ideas could be used as ‘feedforward’ to improve future work.

“It’s brilliant when it says what’s good and why, then what’s inadequate and why, and then what you might have done to make it better. That last bit is the gap that has to be filled. There’s no point in getting feedback unless it really helps you in some way.”

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

“Comments should be on the actual paper to show you where the bits are that they’re talking about, not just on the front cover or at the end. They just say ‘A good assignment; could be more analytical’; it doesn’t actually tell you where it was good or what bits were bad.”

Consistency was an issue in relation to both the equal treatment of students and the way in

which their learning might progress or develop over time and across modules and courses. It was considered unfair that some students received useful feedback and others did not, or that some lecturers were not as supportive and encouraging as others. Two students from the same course and site offered the following:

“My tutor this year has been amazing, following things up and asking if I need help.”

“Some lecturers just never get back to you and if they do they can’t answer the questions anyway.”

Some students suggested that workload is often used by lecturers to explain the lack of feedback provided. However, they felt that as ‘paying customers’ they should have equal rights.

“In our programme we’re told that there are so many students they can’t give us much feedback each, but we pay the same as students in other courses. They should manage us more effectively and plan on the basis that they will have a lot of scripts to mark.”

Another form of inconsistency was the different formats used across different courses and by different staff. As alluded to above, some used tick-boxes, some open comments only or in addition to the boxes, while some provided just a couple of lines on the cover sheet and yet others wrote copious notes on the script. It was suggested that these variations made it difficult to track one’s own progress across time. Furthermore, the varying practice in offering opportunities to submit assignment drafts for feedback or to have one-on-one tutorials left some students feeling disadvantaged.

Inconsistency in marker qualifications was also noted, with those receiving feedback from PhD students rather than experienced lecturers feeling a little disadvantaged. Interestingly, they felt that PhD students tended to be tougher in marking but also more narrow in their comments, giving more technical feedback about writing rather than about content. In addition, students discussed their choice of dissertation topic in relation to which staff member would be supervising it rather than the substance.

The greatest concerns about inconsistency, however, arose when students compared their work and results.

“Four of us worked closely together and presented papers similar in many aspects. There were three or four different markers and the marks and comments varied considerably, with an 18 point range numerically. Do lecturers actually communicate with one another?”

c) Understanding the language of feedback

The language used by lecturers also attracted some attention, with students suggesting that it cannot always be understood. The terms ‘critical’ and ‘analytical’ were singled out by students as causing considerable concern.

“There are comments like ‘be more critical’ or ‘be more analytical’ and I think, ‘I thought I had,’ and I don’t know what it means.”

“Some of my lecturers do sound like they’ve swallowed a dictionary. I had to write down the words and look them up. Everybody says a certain lecturer is a walking thesaurus...so it’s a bit like they’re talking over you sometimes.”

Lecturers, meanwhile, feel that the meaning should be clear to students at university level and that such problems did not occur a few years ago because ‘students then were taught better language skills and understandings while at school.’ Most importantly, perhaps, lecturers point out that whilst they know their own subject matter, they are not qualified to teach language concepts or skills.

However, as referred to above, respondents of one university talked of the valuable assistance offered by their central study advice, academic skills service. They appreciated being able to go there for a chat, to have the feedback given by lecturers interpreted and explained and to discuss ideas for the development of their writing skills. As one reported,

“They offer you coffee and make you feel very comfortable. I never come out of there feeling thick.”

Students were also appreciative when feedback was aimed at them personally, in relation to their own work, rather than being generalised. Where anonymous marking was practised, this feeling was exacerbated, especially where students felt that they had particular needs that should be recognised.

“I like it when the feedback is directed to me in a personal way. It feels as if someone cares about me and my progress.”

“It’s very important that we feel that the feedback is aimed at us and not just a general piece that’s been written and given to everyone regardless.”

d) Promptness / Timeliness

At perhaps the most basic level, the issue on which provider and recipient most agree is that of timeliness. Both students and staff know that the timing of feedback is important. The sooner the feedback is received, the more likely it is to be used, particularly in the formative mode. As evidenced by several writers (eg Orsmond et al 2004, Black and Wiliam 1998), if a student receives feedback early in a given course and is able not only to assess his or her relative progress but see how to improve, then there may be opportunity for development. However, as Black and Wiliam (1998) concluded, while good formative assessment is increasingly valued, certain problems in providing it are increasingly obvious in today’s universities. Timeliness, like other aspects of feedback, has become very difficult given both the trend to modularisation, which

'compresses units, with assessment at the end and little/no feedback in between (Hounsell et al 2005)', and 'the increasing economies of scale in teaching but not in assessment (Glover and Brown 2006)'. Such issues, however, invoke little sympathy on the part of students, who feel that effective and timely feedback is a 'right' for the paying consumer and a matter of fairness across courses and consumers (Higgins et al 2002). If students could be penalised for late submission, then why did lecturers 'get away with' late feedback.

e) Relationships

The staff-student relationship is an issue raised by students much more than by lecturers. This study showed that students were far more likely to take note of feedback from those whom they respected and who appeared to show them respect as well. While there seems no doubt that many lecturers adopt a very supportive approach, which is greatly appreciated, the following comments indicated negative emotional responses that might go unnoticed.

"I was scared out of my wits of my tutor and even when I went to see him I used to shake so much and when I left I'd remember things and have to go and ask somebody else."

"A senior lecturer told me I was a borderline student in terms that I felt were quite degrading and I nearly left."

"...it was only necessary to circle the rubbish once, you don't need to go round and round with big exclamation marks..."

The following staff comment demonstrates the acknowledged importance of developing a good relationship.

"The key to successful feedback is having a rapport in place. When we sit there and we go through the essay and we look at strengths, weaknesses, things that can be improved upon and things that don't need to be changed, that develops a rapport."

However, the issue of 'rapport' needed to be carefully managed.

"There need to be established expectations, such as it's not appropriate for you to be emailing me every day."

"Students can be quite rude and inappropriate in tone of emails."

One programme which scored particularly well put a focus on individual feedback sessions, and these are clearly appreciated by students, even if they do not actually take advantage of the opportunity. Conversely, at a site where scores were lower, students commented on the lack of opportunities to discuss their feedback with tutors.

Conclusions

In many ways this study supports the conclusions of other reports, such as the recent NUS research (2008) and the subsequent identification of 10 principles of good feedback practice (NUS 2009). A general consensus appears to be emerging around a number of key aspects of feedback, for example:

- feedback should be timely
- students should receive clear indications of what they need to do to improve (feed-forward)
- students like feedback that is personal to them
- students need opportunities to discuss their feedback individually
- feedback should be written legibly (preferably electronically) and expressed in a language that the students understand.

However, perhaps the most striking conclusion of this study is the importance of the relationship between staff and student in underpinning these other successful practices. For example, individual discussion of feedback is not seen as helpful if there is not good rapport between the student and tutor. A recurring theme was that of respect, namely the feeling that staff had respect for students, their work and their emotional response to feedback.

Respect also underpins issues around the timing of feedback. Our research findings suggest that students are not necessarily concerned whether feedback is received after a week or a month, provided that it is in time to help with their further studies. Most importantly, students want clear information about when feedback will be received and consistency of practice so that they do not feel disadvantaged in relation to fellow students. Failure by staff to meet feedback targets is seen as disrespectful, especially when students themselves are penalised for late submission.

The personal aspect of feedback is a key feature, which possibly explains why students are less supportive than staff of group feedback sessions. Students want to know that comments relate directly to them, and do not always see the relevance of general comments.

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