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| **Fostering a Supportive Feedback Culture** |

The document below refers to and agrees with the University of Southampton’s [Assessment Feedback to Students Policy](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/imported/transforms/peripheral-block/UsefulDownloads_Download/0B41BE15EA3649079BED54BE33347FD3/Assessment%20Feedback%20to%20Students%20Policy.pdf), which defines the rules and procedures which all teaching staff are required to follow when giving feedback to students on their assessed work. Based on the issues and solutions identified by 100 University staff and students, it aims to establish a common feedback culture wherein all members of the university have the same understanding of good feedback practices, they feel able to engage with them, and challenge and learn from them as well as from each other.

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| **Why is feedback not working?**  The 100 interviews carried out with University staff and students by the Southampton Feedback Champions identified key issues with feedback which can be summarised as follows: | | |
| **Lack of feedback ‘education’ for students**  Students are often unaware of the different ways in which feedback is delivered to them and only view feedback as no more than the written comments on their cover sheet. They also rarely view feedback as a two-way process in which they have a role to play. | **Lack of staff training**  It is felt that there is a lack of training for staff, especially new staff, PhD students acting as markers and staff coming from industry. This may result in non-effective feedback being delivered to students and potentially a lack of consistency in marking. | **Lack of consistency in the delivery of feedback**  Feedback delivery is very faculty specific, with some faculties having specified formal practices based on students’ needs and module construction. There is a need for a University-wide feedback culture, which shares good practice and promotes consistency in feedback delivery. |
| **Fear of engaging with feedback**  Lack of staff training on how to provide feedback and a jaded attitude often translates into students not feeling encouraged to seek feedback, not feeling at ease to discuss it, and fearing humiliation. There is therefore a need for that feedback culture to be supportive to students as well as staff, especially those who are new and coming from industry. | **Lack of dialogue between staff and students**  Feedback needs to be viewed as an ongoing dialogue between staff and students to be effective. However, a disconnect was observed between them, which resulted in students seeing feedback only as a series of separate rather than interconnected events, which all feed into each other. This has a negative impact on maximising students’ potential but also on encouraging them to engage more generally in critical discussion which is at the heart of University life. | **Need for timely feedback**  Timely feedback was highlighted as a significant issue for students as it makes any feedback ‘useless’ when it doesn’t occur. Feedback on one assignment needs to be delivered before submission of the next. Once the module has been ‘passed’, students perceive feedback comments as worthless for other modules. |
| In our interviews, whenever members of staff endeavoured to come up with solutions to the above issues   * by giving plenty of information about assessment and feedback within their module; * by ensuring consistency of marking done by several markers; * by engaging in a dialogue with students through unconventional methods such as Facebook groups, Twitter, email blasts mid-term evaluation forms; * by utilising existing software such as Blackboard and Turn It In; * by giving assignments and feedback in a timely manner, i.e. before other assignments were due and often before the University recommended 4 weeks,   their practice was valued and appreciated by students, and highlighted as best practice, which should be shared across the University. The following recommendations are suggested as potential solutions to the above issues and include examples of best practice which were identified by University staff and students and which also reflect the latest literature on effective feedback in higher education. | | |

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| **How do we foster a supportive feedback culture?**  A supportive feedback culture is a culture in which staff and students recognise what effective feedback is[[1]](#endnote-1). Students feel safe and comfortable to discuss feedback  and they engage equally in the process in order to maximise their potential. It is based on 3 principles: | | |
| **1. Education for all**  Educate students and staff about effective feedback, the different ways in which they receive it and their role within it | **2. Safe communication**  Promote a safe and comfortable environment which nurtures students’ agency and encourages them to engage with staff into a feedback dialogue | **3. Active engagement**  Encourage students to take control of their learning[[2]](#endnote-2)[[3]](#endnote-3) and staff to enable them to do so, so that both can engage in the feedback process and make it more effective[[4]](#endnote-4) |
| Feedback plays a significant part in the learning process and students should therefore be actively encouraged, from the outset, to understand the key issues relating to assessment and feedback at University. The learning, assessment and feedback processes at University can be very different from those which students have encountered previously (at school or in another country).  In managing students’ expectations on assessment feedback, Faculties must ensure that all programmes, at an early stage, (for example, at induction and at the start of modules):   * introduce students to the purposes and methods of assessment * indicate the range and types of feedback that will be made available to students, and explain how and why these may differ from their previous experiences * highlight the sources of additional support for learning that are available and how they may be accessed, if needed   Although it is important to educate students about feedback and assessment at an early stage, it is equally important to repeat this process throughout the year so that it becomes common knowledge. Staff must ensure they:   * convey the importance of recognising feedback as a learning tool or a tool for learning * encourage students to see the relevance of feedback from one module to another (esp. for transferrable skills)   Students too have a role to play in educating themselves about feedback and assessment practices. They must ensure that:   * they are aware of the different ways in which they receive feedback and how they can make it more effective to eventually improve marks and more generally their learning * they actively seek feedback from staff and/or peers when required * they question feedback if they don’t understand it or disagree with it * they give feedback to staff in a constructive way | The University should be a safe and comfortable environment in which its members are encouraged to express themselves and engage with confidence in the feedback dialogue. Staff and students are equal members of the university learning community; as such, they should be perceived as peers and be able to engage into a dialogue without feeling inadequate. To make this happen,   * feedback should be easily accessible and in one place. A dialogue is more likely to happen when the environment is the same for everyone. In other words, one joined system is better than several disconnected systems, e.g. Blackboard, e-Folio, e-Assignments, as these can obstruct a continuing feedback dialogue * communication should take place through multiple channels to facilitate effective feedback. Staff and students may prefer some channels to others so a variety of channels ensures that everyone is satisfied * communication with students should be in a way that they can understand: use electronic over hand written feedback (if not possible, make sure it is legible) and explain any technical language or jargon if necessary * feedback is a personal interaction; it's important to know that both parties care and are involved in the feedback process. Ideally, a rapport should be established between staff and students so that negative or positive feedback is seen as constructive, which will also build students' confidence   Feedback should be perceived as an ongoing dialogue[[5]](#endnote-5) between staff and students as opposed to a series of disconnected events. This dialogue should help students improve their work and staff their practice. An ongoing feedback dialogue means that any misunderstanding can be cleared and feedback is perceived in the right way. This is especially true for international students and staff who face challenges associated with coming from a different learning culture and speaking another language. Through dialogue, they can gradually improve their understanding of feedback by literally talking it through, and avoiding misperception and misunderstanding. | Feedback that staff gives to students on an assignment is only half the story when it comes to improving their work. However useful and constructive feedback is, students will get very little from it by just looking at it. They need to actively engage with it to make the most of it and to actually benefit from it in terms of their next assignment and more generally their learning.[[6]](#endnote-6)  Feedback is a two-way street. Students have a role and a responsibility in making feedback effective as they are equal contributors in the university learning community. Engagement in feedback is important because it is a way of engaging in critical discussion, which is an important skill that students gain from university. It is a key difference between learning at school and in higher education. To make this happen,   * encourage students to engage with each other and promote a constructive culture of peer feedback. Assessing peer work enables students to internalise the assessment criteria and use it for their own benefit. Peer and self-assessment educate students about marking standards as they experience it themselves, which as a result helps them assess their own work better before handing it in and compare their thoughts with the lecturer’s mark/comments[[7]](#endnote-7) * engagement is more likely if students can see their progress. Keeping a record of feedback is important for visualising progress * make feedback real for students. Get students to reflect on previous feedback and make the connection between now and next time. In other words, make the link between feedback and feedforward, allow them to see the long-term use of feedback and get them to commit to future improvements * make feedback available before students have to submit their next assignment as they will be able to use it for the assignment and therefore more likely to engage with it * prioritise feedback rather than overwhelm students with too much criticism; it is then more likely that students will work on a few items, e.g. 2 to 3 areas for improvement, as they will appear more manageable |
| **Examples of feedback practices which foster a supportive feedback culture** | | |
| 1. **Explain to students what effective feedback is** 2. Organise departmental induction sessions about feedback and the different ways students can expect to receive it (make sure you refer to the NSS questions about feedback - prompt, detailed, clarifies what wasn’t understood - so that students can make the connection) 3. Refer students to further online resources like the Feedback Champions website, your own department’s website if you have feedback-related content and the library’s feedback resources 4. Encourage students to reflect on transferable skills gained from modules and how they can be carried forward to future modules & life opportunities; If it is possible, encourage students to collect exam transcripts as the feedback will be useful to them for future modules 5. Say you are giving feedback when you are giving it: make sure you tell students you are giving them feedback when you are, write it in the subject of your email, include a slide on feedback in your lecture PPT, and write it on the board in the classroom. Make it visible so that students can identify it easily 6. Provide assessment criteria so that students know what they’re aiming for and they can tell what they’re good at. It is also good to show examples which meet your assessment criteria and some which don’t so that they can get familiar with the standards 7. Encourage students to value feedback from everyone in the university learning community, e.g. peers, tutors, mentors, as they are all opportunities to access some kind of feedback and get a new perspective on your work | 1. **Use a variety of communication channels and methods to encourage different learners to engage in the feedback dialogue in different ways** 2. Advertise all communication channels available to students 3. Complement verbal feedback with written feedback as it can be hard for international students to take it all in 4. Use the ‘sandwich method’ as it is a good way to deliver feedback as it boosts students’ confidence 5. Try video and audio feedback as it might encourage students to see feedback as a dialogue in a safe context 6. Give general feedback if one-to-one feedback has not occurred; this can also be re-used for future students, which will save time in the long-run 7. Use technology and social media (Blackboard forum, social media, quiz, email, etc) as an alternative forum which gives students other opportunities to engage in the feedback dialogue 8. Use the same system for assessment and feedback across the academic unit to avoid confusing students and enable them to see feedback as an ongoing dialogue between modules 9. Schedule feedback throughout modules rather than just after assessments in order to encourage continuous exchange and learning 10. Encourage students to discuss their feedback with their personal tutor in order to help them to reflect on it and use it for future benefit | 1. **Encourage learners’ autonomy through peer-assessment/feedback & self-assessment/feedback** 2. Develop students’ Knowledge and Understanding (K&U) of the standards by using example essays to calibrate peer assessment, getting students to assess their own or their peers’ work and eventually providing the ‘official’ mark, which students can compare with their own 3. Encourage group presentations followed by class discussions where students give feedback on their peer’s presentations. Public feedback can have greater impact than when received on your own as it gives students a ‘sense of ownership and pride in their work’[[8]](#endnote-8) 4. Try ‘Appraisal’ type marking to develop students’ self-assessment skills:    1. Student marks where they think they are    2. Lecturer grades them as to where they ‘actually’ are    3. Feedback focuses on areas where there is the greatest gap 5. Facilitate a constructive culture of peer feedback by encouraging anything from discussing work in class to commenting on others' work or creating a module or course-related Facebook group or Twitter hashtag 6. Be aware that students need educating on giving feedback to peers as well as to staff. It is important to guide peer feedback at first in order to facilitate constructive peer feedback and foster transferrable skills |
| 1. **Explain to staff what effective feedback is** 2. Provide informal training (colleagues' knowledge and expertise) and formal training to new lecturers who join your department (compulsory in some faculties) on how to appropriately give feedback, i.e. it should be more than a mark, grade or grade indication, or general phrases such as “Good effort” 3. Share University/ Faculty/ Academic Unit specific feedback policies with students and staff. This is especially important for lecturers coming from a non-teaching background or for postgraduate students marking exams 4. Publish assessment schedules at the beginning of each semester (i.e. dates when assessments are set, submitted and dates for results/feedback) 5. Signpost feedback when feedback is being given to improve students’ knowledge of what feedback is (Pavlov's dog) | 1. **Get students to promote a feedback dialogue to each other** 2. Engage with Student Representatives and ask whether they could play a more active role in educating peers about feedback practices and bringing issues to staff prior to module evaluations 3. Get senior UG, PGT or PGR students to provide context to lower-year modules to help them engage in the feedback dialogue (i.e. why is this assessment important? Why should students care?) 4. Make the most of student-staff committees and ensure that students report any issues to their student reps and that student reps feedback to their peers after the committee meeting has taken place. 5. Take your student-staff committee online with UNITU (<http://unitu.co.uk/>), which is a software allowing students, course reps and staff to collectively raise, discuss and resolve academic issues all in one place. It helps closing the feedback loop. 6. Use peer feedback as a way to put students in the lecturer’s position, thus removing the barriers between staff and students, and encourage them to gradually build their confidence to engage in the feedback dialogue with staff | 1. **Develop learner autonomy by encouraging students to keep track of their feedback** 2. Encourage learner autonomy by encouraging students to collect marked assignments so that they can see their feedback and take it on board for future work 3. Encourage students to create an online resource, i.e. a 'feedback portfolio' where all the feedback students get throughout their course is stored and they can refer to it at any time. It can store feedback from all aspects, e.g. assessments, essays, or group work, and should include feedback on content but also on transferrable skills. Electronic feedback makes it easier, either via an assessment software, e.g. e-Assignment, or Word Tracked Changes 4. Ask students to list on the cover sheet of an assignment 3 items they would like feedback on and give detailed feedback only on this. This forces them to make the link between assignments (within the same module or not) and take responsibility for their work 5. Ask students to explain on the cover sheet what they have done to improve on previous feedback |
| **Assessment for learning**  A supportive feedback culture encourages an assessment approach based on Assessment for Learning (AfL), which views assessment as key to ‘help students improve their learning’ and enable them to become independent learners for life, and not just as a measuring tool.[[9]](#endnote-9) | | |
| ‘Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.’[[10]](#endnote-10)  In an AfL perspective, teacher-to-learner as well as learner-to-teacher feedback is key as the former helps learners keep track of their progress towards achieving the learning objectives and the latter (the assessment’s outcomes) helps teachers adjust their teaching to the learners’ needs.  AfL strategies include: the ‘strategic use of questioning’, ‘effective teacher feedback’, ‘peer feedback’, ‘student self-assessment’ and the ‘formative use of summative assessment.’[[11]](#endnote-11) These strategies promote formative assessment practice and are all based on active use of feedback. | | |
| **Examples of assessment practices which foster a supportive feedback culture** | | |
| 1. **Engage with formative assessment to improve students’ learning and enable them to become independent learners** 2. Consider fewer summative assessments to allow for more feedback-rich formative work 3. Recognise the importance of feedback on formative work (not counting or lightly weighted towards final grade) within the learning process. To achieve this, formative assessments should follow the same format as summative ones 4. Consider 2-stage assessment:    * + Stage 1: feedback, no mark      + Stage 2: mark, no feedback = students work on feedback to improve mark 5. **Link assessments to encourage students to use feedback from one assignment to the next** 6. Consider redesigning the sequence of assignments and introduce linked assessment (assignment 1 feeds into 2 which feeds into 3 and then assignment 4 pulls them all together) so that there is continuity between modules & assessments, i.e. have formative assessments that are relevant to future assessments:    * + Feedback works better in linked assessment (feedback helps students to tackle their next piece of work)      + Feedback works less effectively in ‘one cycle’ assignments (a single essay with nothing linked to it before or afterwards - students may not care about the feedback as they won’t do the same assignment again) 7. **Linked assessment assumes prompt feedback, which engages students while it is still fresh in their mind** 8. Feedback needs to be delivered quickly to benefit learning. Although the University policy is 4 weeks for assessments and 6 weeks for exams, ideally, some kind of feedback should be given to students within a week, even if it is only general feedback. This will be very effective as students’ work will still be fresh in their minds. Individual detailed feedback can be given later (within 4 to 6 weeks). 9. Quick feedback (within 1 week) is better late and perfect as it has a bigger impact on students’ learning[[12]](#endnote-12). It can be achieved by:    * + Giving model answers straight after an assignment      + Summarising good and bad points from a few assignments and discussing them in your next lecture      + Giving general feedback to the class to target common issues quickly and then give students the option of coming to see you for more detailed feedback, which addresses specific areas for improvement. This also encourages students to take control of their learning as it is their responsibility to seek more feedback. 10. Interactive learning technologies, e.g. zappers, quizzes, can be used to provide instant feedback and engage students with it in real time | | |

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| **Evaluation of feedback**  For this culture to remain active and adapted to the needs of its members, it needs to be reviewed and evaluated regularly. This can be done via mid-term or end-of-term evaluation forms, student-staff committees or the National Student Survey (NSS) | | | | | | | |
| * Use mid-term evaluation to get feedback from students at a time when it is still possible to make changes to the module that will benefit students (take the opportunity to ask them whether they are satisfied with their feedback they are receiving) * Make the most of student-staff committees by encouraging students to share concerns with their course reps and by encouraging course reps to feed back to students so that they can see that their concerns has been dealt with in some ways * Encourage all students to take part in the NSS so that the Academic Unit gets a truer reflection of what all students think, not just some of them | | | | | | | |
| **What is feedback and how do we recognise it?**  Feedback can take many forms but is not always recognised as such, especially when there is no assessment associated with it. Feedback can be formal (e.g. scheduled appointment with lecturer, written feedback on assignment) or informal (e.g. peer feedback, chat with a lecturer at the end of a class, lecturer's tweet) but in both cases, the content of the feedback is equally valuable.  The following criteria should help you recognise feedback. | | | | | | | |
| What is feedback based on? | What does feedback look like? | What is included in feedback? | What work do you receive feedback on? | Who gives feedback? | Who receives feedback? | Where does feedback take place? | When do you receive feedback? |
| * Assessment criteria * which are themselves based on learning outcomes * which are themselves based on the knowledge, understanding, critical/ thinking ability, and key skills that should be achieved | * Verbal feedback (in class, after the lecture, during office hours) * Written feedback (e.g. problem sheet, mark, cover sheet, annotated work) * Electronic feedback (e.g. email, video, blackboard, social media, quizzes) | * All aspects of learning, e.g. discipline-specific as well as transferrable skills * Specific strengths and weaknesses of the work * Key actions that will lead to improved performance * Further explanation if needed * Encouragement to reflect about one’s learning * Guidance on how further support for learning may be accessed if necessary | * Formative assessment - doesn't count towards your final grade (quiz, lab report, short written assignment) * Summative assessment - counts towards your final grade (exam, presentation, project report, viva) * Placement | Everyone gives and receives feedback including:   * Lecturer * Teaching assistant * Tutor * Peer (other students on your course, study buddies or peer mentors) * Postgraduate student * Practice mentor * Work placement mentor/coordinator * Practitioner * Service user * Skills facilitator * Demonstrator * Software * Research community | * The whole class * A group of students * Individual students | * In the classroom (e.g. lecture, grammar class, lab session, tutorial session, clinical practice task) * Online (blackboard, twitter, online test) * Lecturer’s office * Panel meeting | * Within 4 working weeks after the submission date (assessment) * Within 6 weeks (exam) * For substantial pieces of work (e.g. research projects or dissertations) more time may be needed * Feedback on assignments should be available to all students (multiple groups, cohorts) simultaneously * Any deviations from the above must be communicated as soon as possible to students as well as when the information will be made available |

References

1. Sambell, “Rethinking Feedback in Higher Education: An Assessment for Learning Perspective,” 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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3. Nicol, “Transforming Assessment and Feedback: Enhancing Integration and Empowerment in the First Year.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sambell, “Rethinking Feedback in Higher Education: An Assessment for Learning Perspective,” 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gibbs, “Making the Best Use of Feedback on Assignments: A Guide for Students.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Price et al., “Assessment Standards.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gibbs, “Making Feedback on Assignments Effective: Principles and Guidance for Tutors,” 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sambell, “Rethinking Feedback in Higher Education: An Assessment for Learning Perspective,” 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Assessment Reform Group, “Assessment for Learning – 10 Principles.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Education Services Australia, “What Is Assessment for Learning?” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gibbs, “Making Feedback on Assignments Effective: Principles and Guidance for Tutors,” 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)