Reconceptualising assessment feedback: a key to improving student learning?

Chris Beaumont \(^a\), Michelle O’Doherty \(^b\) & Lee Shannon \(^c\)

\(^a\) Business School, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK
\(^b\) Faculty of Education, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK
\(^c\) Centre for Learning and Teaching, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK


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Reconceptualising assessment feedback: a key to improving student learning?

Chris Beaumonta*, Michelle O’Dohertyb and Lee Shannonc

aBusiness School, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK; bFaculty of Education, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK; cCentre for Learning and Teaching, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

This article reports the findings of research into the student experience of assessment in school/college and higher education, and the impact of transition upon student perceptions of feedback quality. It involved a qualitative study of 23 staff and 145 students in six schools/colleges and three English universities across three disciplines. Results show that students experience a radically different culture of feedback in schools/colleges and higher education, with the former providing extensive formative feedback and guidance, while the latter focuses upon independent learning judged summatively. Students perceived quality feedback as part of a dialogic guidance process rather than a summative event. A model is proposed, the Dialogic Feedback Cycle, to describe student experiences at school/college, and suggestions are made as to how it can be used as a tool to scaffold the development of independent learning throughout the first year of university study.

Keywords: assessment; feedback; transition

Introduction

It is well known that assessment defines the higher education curriculum in students’ eyes (Ramsden 2003), and has a major influence on their learning (Biggs 2003), being viewed as a more powerful than teaching in determining what students do and how they do it (Boud 2007). An established principle of good practice is that ‘action without feedback is completely unproductive for a learner’ (Laurillard 2002, 55). Likewise, a compelling consensus emerges from research that high-quality feedback is the most powerful single influence on student achievement (Hattie 1987; Brown and Knight 1994), and we know that students want and value quality feedback (Hyland 2000; O’Donovan, Price, and Rust 2004). Therefore, assessment has long been viewed as the catalyst for improvement in teaching and learning: ‘If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment’ (Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury 1997, 7), and today the provision of quality feedback is widely perceived as both a key benchmark of effective teaching (Ramsden 2003) and a vital requirement in meeting students’ expectations (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001, 2002).

But how to change assessment in practice to meet these expectations has proved problematic. The issue of feedback quality remains a major concern for higher education institutions. Feedback quality has consistently received the lowest satisfaction

*Corresponding author. Email: chris.beaumont@edgehill.ac.uk
scores in the UK National Student Survey for five consecutive years (National Student Survey 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). In 2009 fewer than 55% of respondents in England agreed that feedback had been detailed, prompt or helped clarify understanding. This is in marked contrast to the overall course satisfaction rate, which exceeds 80% (National Student Survey 2009). Whilst this relatively low level of student satisfaction with feedback raises concerns, it is all the more significant because feedback quality has featured as a frequent cause for concern in Quality Assurance Agency subject reviews (Quality Assurance Agency 2003).

In response, tutors will often echo the observation 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, 20), whilst on the other hand research shows that lecturers often believe their feedback to be more useful than students do (Carless 2006; MacLellan 2001), and Williams and Kane (2009) suggest students need dialogue with tutors to help them interpret comments. More recently, the NUS Student Experience Report (2008) stated that 71% of students wanted verbal feedback on coursework in an individual meeting, but only 25% were given such an opportunity, and, although 62% of students responded that the timing of feedback met their expectations, of those responding ‘no’, 54% wanted feedback to be returned within one or two weeks. Given the significant implications of these differing perspectives, this study addressed one question that needed to be asked: what concepts of quality feedback are informing such an apparent mismatch in perceptions?

Frameworks for good practice in feedback have been developed, but it is noteworthy that attempts to conceptualise the nature of quality feedback within higher education have been positioned within a process of formative rather than summative feedback (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2004, 2006). Furthermore, resource constraints coupled with mass expansion in higher education have reduced opportunities for formative assessment to be practised (Yorke 2003; Gibbs 2006). If we take Sadler’s suggestion that summative assessment is largely for the purpose of summarising the achievement of a student, an essentially passive process that does not have any immediate impact upon learning (Sadler 1989), then today, with increasing numbers of first-year undergraduates finding themselves in large classes that ‘end load’ assessment (Hounsell 2007), summative feedback remains the dominant discourse (Boud 2007). But summative judgement is the problem (Burgess 2007). This article reports staff and first-year undergraduate student perceptions of ‘quality feedback’, as they experience and attempt to negotiate the impact of these changes.

At the same time, within the school sector a concerted attempt has been made to embed an assessment for learning culture (Assessment Reform Group 1999; Sutton 1995) within the curriculum, and assessment for learning is now a central part of government policy (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008), leading to ‘a marked divergence in assessment practices and in the assumptions which tend to drive them’ between sectors (Murphy 2006, 39). However, whilst seminal research has been conducted on the assessment experience of students in schools (Black and William 1998; Black et al. 2003) and universities (Hounsell 2003), there are few studies that investigate the impact of the former on the latter. This article summarises a cross-sector study funded by the Higher Education Academy that makes this connection and addresses this gap in the research literature, positioning first-year undergraduate expectations of quality feedback within the context of their prior experience of a culture of formative assessment. In this way, the article attempts to meet the challenge of the call
by Haggis to develop our understanding of what we currently deem to be our students learning by a ‘step into the unknown’ (Haggis 2009, 389).

**Methodology**

The main aims of the research were to:

1. explore tutors’ and students’ perceptions of what is considered quality feedback;
2. investigate the impact of prior experiences of assessment on students’ expectations of feedback practices in higher education;
3. identify barriers to providing quality feedback.

Qualitative methods were used to provide research findings with a ‘deep’ narrative that can usefully inform what is actually taught (Gibbs 2002).

We used semi-structured focus-groups to explore the perceptions of students (n = 37) who were applying for university at three schools and three colleges in the north-west of England. Teachers were also interviewed (n = 13). First-year undergraduates and tutors were surveyed in focus groups at a university in the north of England (N) in psychology (students n = 24, tutors n = 4), education studies (students n = 24, tutors n = 3) and performing arts (students n = 17, tutors n = 3). A cross-institutional perspective was also obtained by repeating focus groups of psychology students at two other universities, in London (L, n = 29), and the Midlands (M, n = 14). Data collection took place at universities at three points in the year from October to May to investigate changes in student perceptions. Since focus groups were self-selecting, we also employed a questionnaire which used Likert scale questions to check the validity of our findings in October (n = 176) and May (n = 64).

Focus group and interview data were recorded and transcribed. Following the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, data were examined by searching for commonly occurring patterns of views, experiences and underpinning concepts. This is a theoretical framework in which codes are created by interpreting the data to identify important recurring themes that are of interest, and iteratively refining them for internal coherence and mutual exclusivity (as far as possible). Three researchers independently carried out a thematic analysis of the raw data and subsequently collaborated through an iterative process to reach consensus. Member validation was used to verify interpretations whenever possible.

The sampling procedure, involving nine institutions and three disciplines, was designed to increase reliability. It is our contention that this approach, which yielded consistent findings, enables us to propose recommendations of interest to the wider academic community.

**Analysis of results**

*Students’ perceptions of what constitutes quality feedback*

We identified two explicit definitions from students’ responses in all focus groups: a judgement of the standard reached (how well we’ve done); and instructions for learning improvement (how you could do better). Beyond these interpretations, students’ descriptions of what constituted quality feedback were intertwined with descriptions
of assessment tasks, tutors’ behaviour and the general guidance environment that they experienced. We identified two themes which were present in all focus group conversations: feedback as a system of guidance which gave reassurance, and the importance of student–tutor dialogue with available or approachable tutors in this process. Quality feedback was also viewed as both written and verbal, provided within the context of a personal relationship and framed by classroom interactions. It was most prevalent in school pupils’ responses, but was also recounted by undergraduates in examples of good practice. The following voices illustrate these key themes:

personal feedback and being there with the person makes such a difference

we got like a five-minute meeting with him after the drafts … a week later, he’d go through everyone’s with them personally to say what you can do, it’s better than having it written down because you don’t always understand what he’s written.

From the student perspective our analysis shows that quality feedback is perceived as a system of guidance that provides not only a summative judgement of performance, but support through opportunities for a discussion which identifies areas of improvement and scaffolds the student to help achieve higher grades.

School students’ perceptions of their pre-university experiences

Student responses frequently revealed that in school the student experience starts with preparatory guidance for an assessed task, and progresses through the in-task guidance phase to post-submission performance feedback. A model that describes the process is shown in Figure 1, which we call the Dialogic Feedback Cycle. Each of the three stages includes typical activities that students frequently referred to. Each stage is also represented as a cycle to emphasise the iterative dialogue that students often highlighted.

In the initial preparatory guidance phase of the cycle, explicit marking schemes and criteria were commonly available, which were discussed in class with the use of exemplars and/or model answers. The opportunity for discussion in class was emphasised. In four out of the six schools/colleges we surveyed, students indicated that information from their previous performance was also used to set target grades for each individual. One student described it as follows:

It’s taken from your GCSEs [English public examination at age 16] and it’s … like the lowest you’re expected to get, so like if you do a piece of work and it’s below, you often have to do it again until it’s either above the target grade or on your target grade.

The importance of grades was emphasised at the start of the assessment process. Assessment criteria are inextricably related to grades, and students in all schools/colleges surveyed displayed a strong awareness of the criteria/marking schemes:

when I did my A-levels [English public examination prior to university entrance] we knew exactly what they wanted from us.

You’re encouraged to use it a lot in class, like if you’re doing coursework they’ll give you a sheet or like assessment criteria, then they’ll teach you in class how you can do this and help you in your coursework.
The last comment demonstrates two points: firstly, the systematic opportunities provided for active engagement with the use of criteria as students move into the in-task guidance phase of the cycle. Secondly, it shows efforts to promote self-assessment – although very few students reported independently using self-assessment.

Two approaches, identified by both students and teachers, for promoting engagement with the criteria were peer marking and marking of exemplar material. Students in all focus groups reported having experience of peer marking, although it met with a mixed reaction. Some regarded it as constructive and motivational:

It’s good because it gives you somebody else’s perspective on your work that you might not be able to see … it makes you try harder because … you don’t want to look stupid in front of everyone else.

However, a much greater proportion reported negative experiences relating to trust, competency and plagiarism:

I’d feel like my essay hasn’t been marked properly.

I’ve had my work copied twice.
I didn’t like it at all … lack of trust in other people I suppose.

Exemplar material was seen as an essential means of modelling what was required:

they do it more when you are planning an essay … examples of what you have to put in … but you have to do it though.

Teachers and students cited a high level of discussion and interaction at the in-task guidance phase: the assignments given to students were often broken down into smaller tasks, and students in all focus groups related that they could submit (often multiple) drafts to the teacher; almost all students reported receiving written and verbal feedback within one week of submission. The feedback was frequently reported to be specific and detailed, and face-to-face support was offered both formally (in lessons and timetabled support classes) and informally (for example, at lunch breaks). Students in all the schools/colleges also acknowledged the ease of access to and frequency of teacher support.

At this stage, the role of drafts was identified by both teachers and students as particularly important; some school departments had rules about the number of drafts a student could submit, although students suggested that these were not rigorously applied:

they had the option of five drafts … then the final.

It’s normally only two but it depends.

we could hand coursework in as many times as we wanted.

However, this type of support can also be ‘misused’, as both students and teachers identified gaming behaviour associated with the use of drafts:

If you do it too many times, it ends up with the teacher kinda writing it for you.

When school students and teachers were told that it was not common practice for students to submit drafts at university, they considered that it would be problematic:

we’ve learned to rely on drafts and rely on feedback, so if you’re not getting that at university, it’s going to be a big shock.

The final stage, performance feedback, was usually delivered in both written and verbal form, again providing opportunity for dialogue. Teachers also emphasised the process of consistently and systematically using the criteria laid down by the examination boards:

they are getting marked according to the exam scheme all the way through and eventually it sinks in … we absolutely hammer, the main thing.

The students interviewed expressed a strong desire to receive grades/marks together with feedback comments. Both teachers and students perceived the school system as being focused on improving grades. A further theme of reassurance and motivation also permeated the study in responses of students and teachers, demonstrating a strong, shared awareness of the power and impact on self-esteem that assessment and feedback can have.
Feedback on drafts was often reported to be attended to by students and seen as critical. However, students mentioned action planning as a result of post-assessment feedback on just two occasions. When students in school did cite poor feedback examples, they focused upon feedback that could not be understood or provided insufficient detail as to how to improve:

We used to get like question marks next to things and you’d go ‘what does that mean?’

We don’t get told where we’ve gone wrong, so we don’t know how to improve.

In general, students reported being highly satisfied with their experience of feedback in school/college. In response to our questionnaire about their previous institution, 80% agreed that feedback was clearly related to the assessment criteria and useful, 75% that feedback was frequently encouraging, 62% that feedback was provided in enough detail and 65% that they were able to receive feedback on drafts.

University students’ perceptions of first-year experiences

Our survey results show that dissatisfaction with feedback is apparent within the first three months of entering higher education, and that perceptions did not significantly alter throughout the first year. Both qualitative and quantitative data confirmed that students in the study experienced a transition from high to lower satisfaction ratings for feedback.

Respondents were drawn from two of the three institutions, L (n = 61, all psychology) and N (total n = 115, 12 psychology, 68 education studies and 35 performing arts). When surveyed about their expectations at university early in their first term, 91% expected feedback to be given in enough time for it to be useful to them. When surveyed later, at the end of their first year (n = 64), only 49% agreed that this had been their experience. While 92% expected that feedback would help them to improve their work, only 60% felt that they had actually been able to improve as the result of feedback. And, while 89% expected to understand the feedback they were given, only 65% agreed that they understood the feedback they actually received.

Such results raise the immediate question – by what standard is the quality of feedback in higher education being judged? We suggest that the answer lies in the Dialogic Feedback Cycle model.

Stage 1: preparatory guidance

Many students considered the transition to university to be a culture shock, and while they showed an awareness of the need for independent learning, they did not feel that they were supported in developing the associated skills:

thrown in at the deep end

Now when we’ve got into here it just, we’ve lost all that [support] and you’re just like ‘whoa’.

The feeling of loss of contact and forced reliance on resources rather than a tutor are exemplified in the following:
They do warn you about it to be honest, but you don’t think it’s going to be that extreme. I knew I wouldn’t be force-fed, but this is my first year, I’ve never done referencing before, I’ve never done this subject before, and then all of a sudden they expect you to know it all just from this sheet.

Participants in the study frequently emphasised the newness of university assessments as a major cause of anxiety, reporting that their previous study had not prepared them for the transition.

Nobody really understood that we didn’t know the difference between A-level work and university work.

It’s our first time doing anything and I don’t know what they’re expecting, I don’t know what they want and if they give us sort of examples, some sort of criteria of what we need in it, just this time, then that would be absolutely fine by me and I would know then from now on.

Students expressed satisfaction when discussing instances where guidance provided a clear indication of what was expected:

The lecturer said at the end of the session, she said exactly what she wanted from our coursework, and it was very, very good. And I had one of my best marks in this essay, because I knew exactly what she wanted from me.

This advice may seem very directive, but it does appear to help the student model the requirements of university scholarship.

Stage 2: in-task guidance

The level of in-task guidance was considerably diminished compared to school/college. Only one tutor marked (optional) draft essay plans, though she reported a low uptake for this service.

Students expressed anxiety regarding support, and while some felt confident in approaching their tutors, most were unsure who (or where) to go to, being unclear whether it should be a lecturer, seminar tutor or personal tutor. One course in university N was introducing peer mentors as a support mechanism, but students expressed reservations about the level of expertise of their peers:

The actual student isn’t going to be the marker. So he won’t know exactly what is expected, so I might give out different information compared to someone else.

Variation in guidance was not confined to perception of peer mentors, however, and inconsistency of advice, instruction and marking was a theme that was raised in several subjects and universities. Students were being exposed to many more sources of information than in their previous environments and were struggling to come to terms with it at times:

See I’ve found one person saying one thing and then someone else will say another thing … it’s like, well what do you do?

An issue raised by students and university tutors alike at this point was the lack of contact time, which for students equated to a lack of support:
In sixth form it was one extreme, there was loads of help, and then here I don’t think there’s very much help.

Stage 3: performance feedback on final submission
Students highlighted what they perceived as both useful and ineffective examples of feedback. In the examples of quality feedback given, two characteristics stood out that were consistent with practices at school: these were the opportunity for discussion (especially one to one) and relevant, meaningful feedback that could be acted on. Students identified immediate feedback received on performances and presentations as some of the most useful. At university the opportunity to discuss a piece of work and feedback was seen as an unusual, but highly positive occurrence:

The feedback from psychology was quite good … because she sat down with us and she went through each individual point.

Individual discussion was also coupled with the desire for personalised feedback:

I think more verbal feedback; I think you understand it more when it’s talked through.

Students from all universities reported frequent experiences that they rated as poor. The lack of timeliness was a common criticism; in particular students complained that feedback was too late to be acted upon:

We had no feedback from the other essay that we handed in … so how are we meant to write [the] big essay without the feedback from the smaller one.

They also considered three weeks to be a long time to wait for feedback (a ‘standard’ in one university).

Sometimes feedback sheets were returned without the work, so that students did not know ‘where they had gone wrong’, but by far the most frequently expressed dissatisfaction was with the perceived lack of detail in the comments provided:

We’ve got comments from our tutor, very few comments about the work. ‘Is this relevant?’ and stuff like that, but not saying why it’s not relevant.

Like one or two sentences. Introduction was good. What was good about it? I want to know more detail; they don’t really tell you things.

I don’t know, I mean the main impression that I got from the essay was that references was the main thing that was being marked on.

Students often reported that they struggled to make use of the feedback they received, in either understanding what was written or appreciating how it could help them improve. From the student perspective, dissatisfaction with the nature of feedback appears to relate to lack of contact with tutors and the unfamiliarity of university work, all of which serves to further emphasise the feeling that they are not being supported. From the data it is clear that students in this study value feedback as a means of preparation for the next piece of work. The comments show that they desire engagement with the learning process and want to know ‘what are they doing right?’ and ‘how can they improve?’ The impact of not meeting those needs is evident:
As the year’s gone on I’ve found it more and more demotivating and harder and harder
to do it and I just can’t do it, because I don’t know I’m doing it right or anything.

There was a clear mismatch in perceptions regarding the usefulness of feedback,
with students’ use of feedback proving to be a contentious point with a number of
tutors. Tutors generally expressed the view that many students did not make use of
feedback, citing uncollected assignments and the need to repeat comments. Yet
students in our study insisted that they attempted to make use of feedback – if it was
meaningful and relevant:

I had only one coursework back … [which had] detailed comments, but it happened just
once for cognitive psychology, and later I didn’t receive any. Very, very, very poor in
general. So I don’t really know what I had to change.

Yeah it’s too general, there’s nothing you can do with it, you know. You’re going to say,
okay this time it was like this, but it’s too general to make anything out of it.

What is clear from the analysis of both focus group and questionnaire responses
is that students in this study experienced a transition throughout their first year,
recalling high satisfaction with their school/college feedback system but high levels
of anxiety and dissatisfaction with the level of guidance provided in higher educa-
tion. Throughout the study feedback on written coursework was viewed most nega-
tively, a finding confirmed by the questionnaire, in which 60% of respondents felt
they needed more support in writing their assignments, with the focus group
responses consistently revealing that previous experience had provided little or no
preparation:

You’re writing absolutely different, so I have to learn everything from new.

**Teachers’ perceptions of what constitutes quality feedback**

In all cases, teachers identified the purposes of feedback as being to improve perfor-
mance and to communicate achievement against standards. The standards used were
the examination board assessment criteria, and teachers stressed the need for consis-
tent use of these criteria and communication of them to their students. They saw feed-
back linked explicitly and in detail to the criteria, identifying current performance and
actions to be taken to improve. Individualised student target grades were used in four
out of six schools.

Just as students perceived feedback as a continuous process, teachers talked in the
same terms, using a variety of approaches to engage students with the assessment
process and the criteria. All of the teachers reported that they had used forms of peer
assessment. Some teachers reported receiving training in ‘assessment for learning’
metho. Self-assessment was expressed as a common aim, although it was only
reported as actively being reinforced as a process by students and teachers in half of
the schools/colleges surveyed. All teachers interviewed reported the use of exemplars,
such as previous coursework answers or past examination papers.

Within the assessment guidance process, all teachers, in all of the schools/colleges,
placed a high emphasis on the use of drafts and a rapid turnaround, almost always
within a week of submission. They also described a culture where students were
expected to find teachers for help outside of class; for example, at the end of the
school day. Some teachers stressed the importance of getting to know students and personalising feedback.

Most teachers raised the issues of students’ lack of independent study skills and pointed to the need for students to be helped to develop such skills:

You can’t make the leap from a rigidity of thought to a total openness of thought, unless somebody tells you how to do it.

**University tutors’ perceptions**

University tutors unanimously identified *improvement in performance* as the main function, and most also explicitly identified the importance of motivation in the feedback process. While all tutors recognised the importance of verbal feedback and dialogue, there was considerable variety in approaches to this, ranging from designing seminar sessions to enable the inclusion of one-to-one and group–tutor discussion, to communicating to students the time and availability of tutor surgery hours and appointments. Most tutors (seven out of ten) also expressed the importance of specific and detailed feedback, and a variety of approaches were used to maximise personal feedback. Examples included checklists of common errors, checklists of assessment criteria which were met by the assignment, annotated scripts and detailed comments on feedback sheets. However, most expressed concern that they need to spend considerable time dealing with relatively basic errors in academic writing, rather than being able to focus on higher level aspects.

Perhaps the most significant points to emerge from our analysis concerned the divergence in perceptions and practice from school teachers. None of our university tutors foregrounded explicit criteria. Some tutors used tacit marking criteria, though in two out of three departments agreed assessment criteria were available. Only one tutor said that they discussed these actively with the class.

The second significant difference was the diversity of practices related to formative assessment activities. All of the approaches identified in the study of school practices were used in one way or another, across the three universities and within each of the three disciplines – but there was no consistency, and the implementation of these practices largely depended on individual tutors’ beliefs and, therefore, within the context of an individual module or across a programme no systematic process of guidance could be identified. Furthermore, the use of drafts proved contentious, being seen as undesirable from the perspectives of workload and dependency. However, an insightful comment from one teacher captures a fundamental difference in assessment practices, which appears epistemological and raises questions of pedagogy:

You can’t make that leap from a rigidity of thought to a total openness of thought, unless someone tells you how to do it.

**Discussion**

In seeking to understand the perspectives upon feedback of both staff and students across educational sectors we have found the last quotation particularly compelling, as it illustrates both the problem revealed in our research and a possible solution. In this section we draw together key findings from our results as a means of providing a rationale for our recommendations.
Aim 1: explore tutors’ and students’ perceptions of what is considered quality feedback

Our study demonstrated that students arrive at university conditioned by the experience of high levels of interaction with teachers, within a school/college focused on delivering improvement in performance as measured by grades. Students throughout all institutions surveyed in three geographical locations reported having previously experienced feedback as a formative guidance process, which provides clarification and enhances motivation.

The impact of this prior experience was identified in the responses of first-year undergraduate students. As a result, they perceived quality feedback as important for improvement, articulated a strong desire to receive guidance prior to the submission of an assignment, and repeatedly claimed that they made use of feedback. Quality was perceived as feedback that was timely, provided detailed explanatory comments and was supplemented by the opportunity for discussion, ideally one to one and face to face with tutors. A large majority of students expressed the desire that feedback should include a grade as a standard indicator and criterion-referenced comments. In particular, students viewed the opportunity to discuss drafts and have access to exemplars as vital aspects of quality feedback.

All teachers and university tutors emphasised the purpose of feedback for student improvement and learning. However, our interpretation of the interview data is that most university tutors perceived feedback primarily as a post-submission summative event, rather than as a process of discussion starting with the assignment brief and marking criteria and following through with in-task guidance. A striking feature of the practice reported at universities was the inconsistency of feedback methods and formative assessment practices. There was little consistency within the departments we surveyed regarding the availability of preparatory guidance, the use of peer or self-assessment, drafts or verbal and written feedback practices, and no identifiable process could be determined. Tutors also reported receiving no training about how to provide quality feedback, even though some had completed accredited courses.

The tutors we interviewed reported giving extensive and detailed written feedback on assignments, and stated they recognised the importance of motivational comments, although very few of the students who took part in the focus groups confirmed that this is what they perceived that they received. Consequently, there is a significant mismatch between students’ and tutors’ perceptions of the feedback experience.

Aim 2: investigate the impact of prior experiences of assessment on students’ expectations of feedback practices in higher education

Our research suggests that many schools and colleges operate an integrated feedback process during pre-university courses which aims to deliver high grades. Both teachers and students used the term ‘spoon-feeding’ to describe aspects of this process, and readily acknowledged the role it plays in the development of a dependency culture, rather than one that promotes autonomous learning.

Teachers acknowledged this dependency as an issue, but considered the pressure to maintain league table positions conflicted with the aim of developing independent learning. On the other hand, university tutors frequently reported a continuing expectation of autonomy and highlighted students’ lack of independent learning skills. Thus, we found awareness that the way in which the feedback process was
implemented in schools did little to prepare prospective entrants for the realities of assessment in higher education.

Given this prior experience, it is not surprising that feedback in higher education is found not to meet students’ expectations of quality. Particular weaknesses articulated by students are identified in the first two stages of the Dialogic Feedback Cycle model. Students repeatedly discussed receiving inadequate preparatory guidance, with little formative feedback or discussion of written comments with a tutor. Further issues identified at Stage 3 related to consistency of marking by teams of tutors, timeliness of feedback and a lack of detail in written feedback.

Interestingly, whereas the National Student Surveys indicate final-year students’ dissatisfaction regarding the quality of feedback, our findings established that this perception is already prevalent within the first three months of university experience, and we have provided evidence that this mismatch is rooted in students’ previous experience of feedback as a guidance process. More seriously, some students reported being demotivated as a result of these experiences.

Aim 3: identify barriers to quality feedback at university

The evidence presented above suggests that a fault line currently exists between the school and higher education sectors, with the result that students expect not only more but different feedback. First-year undergraduates expected detailed guidance, while university tutors frequently cited the importance of independent learning and practised a system that generally provided feedback as a post-submission, summative event. The formative approach used in schools and colleges focused upon delivering high grades. This was found to be partly driven by league tables, though universities are complicit since grades are used to determine access to higher education, and consequently students in the study argued that meeting this requirement was their priority. Furthermore, given the continuing demands to achieve high grades, teachers stated that it is unlikely that schools will change.

In response, we consider that it is in universities’ interests to adapt their assessment practices to support transition more effectively by taking into account students’ prior experience. In doing so, we contribute to the growing demand for change in the higher education assessment system from within the academy (Price et al. 2008). Throughout this study, university tutors frequently explained a lack of pre-submission guidance in terms of ‘independent learning’. However, providing the opportunity for independent study is no longer sufficient when significant numbers of first-year students have not yet developed this capability. Given that we know that assessment is the engine that drives student learning, we argue that the aim of the first-year university feedback practices should be structured to explicitly develop students’ capacity for self-regulated learning. To label this as spoon-feeding or pandering to student satisfaction surveys would be to misread what we regard as the fundamental aim of feedback practice, which is to progressively and explicitly develop students’ self-evaluative skills through engagement in the process, so that ‘the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself’ (Sadler 1989, 121). Nor are we placing the ‘blame’ on universities, and suggesting they become like schools; rather we are highlighting that systemic differences impede effective learning, and universities have the power to address this issue.
A further barrier to quality feedback is the reduction in the unit of resource with the expansion of higher education. This has led to a reduction and possible removal of formative assessment from courses and reduced timeliness, quality and quantity of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson 2004). Even so, our findings show that tutors often report devoting hours writing feedback comments, mainly on summative assessment, and that students often do not collect assignments and do not appear to attend to comments. This contradicts the students’ own assertion that they value and take notice of feedback. However, the two statements are not necessarily mutually exclusive — students see relevant comments as those they can use to improve immediate performance. The feedback activities that students valued highly were those related to formative assessment. Our evidence suggests comments are ignored where they are perceived as being too late to be applied to the ongoing assignment. We would suggest that in not collecting post-summative feedback, students are evidencing a systemic failure in providing feedback that, using the students’ own definition of quality, is not timely or relevant enough to be useful. Furthermore, since tutors stated that many students do not apply feedback to future work, there is a mismatch between students’ and tutors’ perceived value of comments which have power to improve learning and performance in the longer term.

One approach that could mitigate resource issues is the use of peer and self-assessment, and perhaps the most important benefit of this approach is that stated by Boud and Falchikov (2007), who argue that developing these abilities is one of the keys to self-regulated learning and sustainable assessment. A naive analysis could, therefore, see peer assessment as the silver bullet that addresses the weakness of self-regulated learning, while accommodating the decrease in unit of resource. However, our results suggest that peer assessment was unpopular among first-year students, who raised concerns about the level of expertise and reliability of peer assessors. Thus, a further major challenge is the design of curricula to teach students how to perform peer (and self-) assessment effectively.

A way forward: reconceptualising feedback as a guidance process

When we discussed the meaning of quality feedback with students and school teachers, they unanimously talked about feedback as continuous dialogue within a cyclical assessment process. Feedback was never considered as a single event. From published research, we see that the concept of quality feedback within the research community has changed from that of an expert correcting a student’s errors towards a student-centred model (Hounsell 2006; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Rust, Price, and O’Donovan 2003). But whilst principles of good practice (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006) are useful, they are not enough on their own: these principles need to be systematically implemented at suitable points within the cycle of assessment to be effective. Reconceptualising feedback as a process (or system), rather than an event, is important since it highlights the time-dependent nature of feedback activities.

We have modelled the experiences of school students using the Dialogic Feedback Cycle. This model is derived from empirical data. At each stage in this model we have identified activities and products that were reported by participants: consequently it is underpinned by a strong evidence base. The name acknowledges that this model enacts several of the principles cited by emphasising iterative and formative discussion at each of the stages as students work through an assessed coursework task.
The three stages also highlight important activities at each point, enabling the model to be used both for analysing current practice and for planning course design.

In schools/colleges this cycle aims to deliver improved grades, but not to develop autonomous learning. However, we do not consider this to be an intrinsic shortcoming of the process itself: on the contrary, we suggest that the cycle can be adapted to the higher education context as a tool for scaffolding the development of the skills necessary for self-regulated learning and academic discourse. Indeed, in a recent study, Whitfield et al. (2008) successfully adapted the Dialogic Feedback Cycle as a means of auditing current practice and systematically planning interventions to scaffold the development of academic writing in first-year undergraduates. Subsequently, it was also used to design the implementation of a blended patchwork approach to develop reflective writing with second-year music undergraduates (Walters and O’Doherty 2008).

Furthermore, the Dialogic Feedback Cycle mirrors Zimmerman’s (2008, 279) model of self-regulated learning, which consists of three phases: forethought, performance and self-reflection. Zimmerman claims that learners who engage in high-quality forethought are more effective at self-regulated learning. Forethought occurs at the preparatory guidance stage of the Dialogic Feedback Cycle, including goal setting and task analysis; thus, in seeking to develop self-regulated, rather than dependent, learners, it makes sense to focus more attention at the start of the Dialogic Feedback Cycle.

The National Student Surveys and the National Union of Students’ Student Experience Report (2008) have consistently demonstrated that the quality of feedback is perceived to be the least satisfactory aspect of higher education in England today. Our study provides a cross-sector, evidence-based explanation of these results, and from this informed perspective we have proposed a model which can also be adapted and may be used as a tool to assist course designers to help ease the student transition into higher education.

Our recommendations for improving the quality of feedback to students in first-year university classes are based primarily on the need to redesign curricula explicitly to embed formative assessment activities, by refocusing effort to deliver formative feedback during the first two stages of the Dialogic Feedback Cycle, namely the provision of pre- and in-task guidance, and saving time by reducing summative assessment feedback at the post-submission stage. In particular, we suggest that courses should use the structured feedback practices within this cycle to explicitly develop self-regulated learning. In this way we suggest higher education will be responding to the voice of one student who spoke for so many when he argued, ‘I know it’s uni so we can’t be spoonfed … but at least give us the spoon’.

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