

# Feedback and Feed-Forward

This is an extended version of the introduction for the section on feedback and feed-forward in the UK Centre for Bioscience Assessment Briefing, available at [www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/briefings/assessment.aspx](http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/briefings/assessment.aspx)

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There is a growing consensus, within existing literature, and amongst HE practitioners of all disciplines on the value of feedback to students. It is an important and powerful component of the learning experience, and has long been recognised as one of the most powerful single influences on student achievement (see for example, Hattie's (1987) review of 87 meta-analyses of studies of what makes a difference to student achievement). Laurillard (1993) makes the point clearly:

*'action without feedback is completely unproductive for the learner'*

On one level the principles underpinning good feedback are straightforward and are articulated clearly by educationalists such as David Nichol or Graham Gibbs (2003). It seems obvious that comments given in a timely fashion, are constructive, recognising strengths as well as areas for development, address the student as an individual and offer signposts to further help and information, will facilitate student progression and personal development.

However, there is a lot of evidence that, in spite of this pivotal role of feedback, staff and students are dissatisfied with many aspects of it: for example, content, timing, usefulness, purpose, engagement with it....

Much research and developmental work is being carried out, within institutions in particular and the sector at large, to find and implement solutions to the various levels of dissatisfaction. However, while approaches to addressing these aspects of dissatisfaction may differ, what is clear is that there is a growing impetus for change, although strategies for change are not easily translated into reality. These anomalies could be explained away by attributing the gulf between theory and practice to ever-growing student numbers, the challenges facing staff as they juggle growing workloads, and/or the impact of the widening participation agenda on the range of student needs identified within any one cohort. However, if responses to surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) are to be believed, then the influence within the sector of initiatives such as The Formative Assessment in Science Teaching (FAST) ([www.open.ac.uk/fast](http://www.open.ac.uk/fast)) project, has clearly not contributed to a significant change overall.

While the NSS results are important, and an indication of a need for wide ranging changes, much institutional response has often seemed to involve activity directed strategically at those final year students who are about to complete the survey. Such strategies may involve elements of 'coaching' - not by persuading students to provide particular answers, but to at least to 'remind' them of the varieties of feedback they may have received, and that these should be included in their responses to the NSS questions.

There has also been an increasing focus on the mechanics of providing feedback, for example on the timing and timeliness of comments offered by tutors, often involving the use of various electronic feedback 'wizards' and electronic feedback grids: from audio-feedback tools that allow students to hear the intonation in the lecturer's voice,

to feedback macros and wizards that help to automate and speed up the process so that more time can be dedicated to providing clear consistent messages and signposts to students, through to techniques to close the feedback loop. However, while such approaches have had limited success where students have been particularly concerned about the late return of some feedback, they have often not paid attention to the usefulness and effectiveness of this feedback.

The latter issue suggests a more fundamental problem. The challenges we believe hang on two main issues:

Firstly, for many staff and students, feedback can be conceptualised as something occurring at the end of the process rather than throughout. It is regarded as a final product rather than a springboard for learning that can be drawn on and used to facilitate future development. To this end, the term **feed-forward** may be a better way of describing comments addressed to the student in relation to work, even when such work has been awarded a final mark as in a summative assessment.

The second issue in relation to feedback relates to the affective domain, and the relationship between the semantics of how feedback is phrased and the impact of this on the learner and their ability to engage with and utilise the comments made. Feedback is not given within an emotional vacuum. When students receive their work they do so within the context of personal hopes, expectations, beliefs about who they are as a student, as a person, fears about whether they are good enough, all of which inevitably makes feedback an incredibly personal issue. Written comments can be open to mis-interpretation and if signposting is not clear and consistent the student can be left 'hanging', unsure as how to proceed.

Above all for feedback to be effective it needs to occur as part of an ongoing dialogue with the student where there is space to check for understanding, discussion of ideas and exploration of how to progress the work.

Included below are some key observations collated from research, conference presentations and perceived wisdom over the last 5 years, together with a range of suggestions of how staff might approach changes to delivering feedback. Also included within this best practice bulletin is a summary of a broad range of exciting initiatives that are taking place to support the delivery of high quality feedback and to share ways that they can be translated into everyday practices so that ongoing staff-student dialogue becomes the norm.

### **Observations and possible strategies from current work**

There is no ideal feedback method which can be standardised – it is not an isolated product, it is a dialogic process integrated in all learning and teaching activities. But all feedback needs to be personalised and in a language the student can understand.

- Use feedback practices which build students' understanding of criteria and quality, providing students with the opportunity to evaluate their own and others' work, giving feedback to others and developing their self-assessment skills.
- Help students and staff understand the broader purpose of feedback, and that it is not just related to assessment, but integrated into the teaching and learning.
- Integrate feedback practices with assessment strategies at the module and programme levels, and create an institutional environment that encourages engagement, so that students see the value of using feedback and close the performance gap.

- Prepare staff to give, and base feedback on, an interaction and dialogue amongst students and teachers, developing assessment practices based on a shared understanding of quality, consistency and validity.
- Promote feedback as a shared responsibility between students and tutors: a dialogue, not a monologue, and not an end point but a process linked with opportunities for further learning.

### **Possible strategies for giving feedback and encouraging engagement**

- Explain the feedback process
  - Discuss support/expectations – explain reasons for feedback
  - Discuss marking, reading, correcting, encouraging... – what are we doing?
- Negotiate with students about what feedback you are going to give, and what feedback they want, so you're not spending hours on each minor grammatical error for each individual. This could be included in a generic feedback session.
- Give less feedback - so it won't take so long to do.
  - Three things that will make a difference - rather than everything you've done wrong
- Give generic feedback quickly, (could be verbal) and more detailed individual later - but negotiate this with the students so that they know what's happening
- Don't give copious feedback on final pieces of work (end of semester two - students won't read it...)
- Drafting - it spreads the load, and you don't have to mark/feedback on everything at the end
- Adhere to timetables, but inform students if there's a problem
- Peer - students' reflection on own/others' performance
- Use online tools, but bear in mind
  - standard feedback grids are not written for students - they are often of no use to students in improving
  - grids etc may contain some useful bits which a student can 'pullout' e.g. on critical analysis - but usually these weaknesses are often signalled but not how to correct. Feedback should give guidance relevant to future work (feeds forward)
  - they are not a substitute for quality – we can deliver poor feedback extremely quickly

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### **References**

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Laurillard, D. (1993) *Rethinking University Teaching; a framework for the effective use of educational technology* (1<sup>st</sup> edn.) New York: Routledge

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