

Serial number 0074
Title Supporting students' engagement with feedback: The adoption of student-focused feedback practices in the UK and Australia
Submitter Dr. Naomi Winstone, Prof. David Boud

Introduction

Feedback has the strongest influence on students' achievement (Hattie, 2009), yet commonly emerges as the area of their experience with which students are least satisfied (Williams & Kane, 2008). Concerns over the promptness and utility of feedback are set against a significant period of change in UK HE, involving a rise in accountability and quality assurance, alongside a more prominent student voice (Medland, 2016).

Such challenges are not unique to the UK. Concerns over student satisfaction with assessment and feedback are dominant in Australian higher education, where student responses to the Course Experience Questionnaire paint a similar picture to those from the NSS in the UK. With the introduction of a national website (QILT) making quality indicators easily visible, and the proposal in the 2017 Federal Budget that large parts of university funding will be contestable on the basis of these indicators, the high level of disquiet about student views on assessment and feedback has been exacerbated.

Academics have responded to these challenges by committing increasing effort to provide what they believe are timely, detailed and useful comments on students' work (Robinson et al., 2013). Emphasis on one-way communication through the use of written comments as feedback practice represents what Carless (2015) terms the 'old paradigm' of feedback practice. The 'new paradigm' (or Feedback Mark 2—Boud and Molloy, 2013) represents a very different way of thinking, with a focus on students active engagement and use of feedback, and the effects of feedback information on students' subsequent work. These paradigms represent two very different '*feedback cultures*'; one where the student is a passive receiver of feedback, and one where they are a proactive recipient (Winstone et al., 2017). The latter approach results in a more sustainable assessment process (Boud, 2007) that develops skills of self-regulation (Carless et al., 2011) and promotes dialogue (Nicol, 2010).

The aim of this SRHE and OLT-funded research, conducted in the UK and Australia, is to understand the factors that influence the adoption of feedback practices that place student learning at their heart. Is practice shifting in the direction of the 'new' paradigm, and if it is, in what ways is it doing so, or is it largely left behind with the 'old' paradigm?

Methods

The phase of the research discussed in this paper involved an online survey designed to surface practices, attitudes and beliefs in the domains of assessment and feedback from the perspective of teaching staff. Surveys were distributed to staff in two large Australian universities (N = 399) and a diverse range of institutions across the UK (N = 309). In this paper we focus specifically on survey items assessing adoption of 'new paradigm' feedback practices where student learning is the core focus. These items focus on details of feedback practices: mode, provision of information to students, types of information provided, evidence of effects, etc. We adopted a situated approach, recognising that practices enacted are influenced by the dominant 'feedback culture', which may reflect institutional, disciplinary as well as pedagogical differences. In line with this approach, we adopted a comparative case study approach, in order that findings could be examined in relation to their wider socio-cultural contexts, and to ensure that differences in sampling frames could not be misinterpreted as explanatory factors. As a result, our analytic strategy involved interpretation of our situated data against a comparison of key features of the Higher Education systems in the UK and Australia.

Findings

Comparative analysis of the case studies revealed that staff in both countries identified a widespread acceptance of feedback as more than input, but as helping students to identify gaps in their understanding, and informing improvement in subsequent work. However, staff in both the UK and Australia reported that active feedback-seeking and dialogue on the part of students is rare. Respondents in Australia were more positive than their counterparts in the UK about the extent to which students are motivated by, and make active use of, feedback. This finding may reflect differences in the nature of discourses around consumerism between the two international contexts.

If feedback processes are to move towards a model where student learning is seen as the primary outcome, then a substantial shift in practices needs to occur. Our data demonstrate that examples of new paradigm practices are evident in both countries, and that academic discipline is an important influence on the adoption of such practices. However, old paradigm approaches dominate

practice. For example, in both the Australian and UK samples, the provision of exemplars, and invitations to discuss feedback, were some of the least evident practices. Rather than specific feedback practices being influenced by the national context, they appear strongly related to pedagogic designs and are influenced by summative assessment practices.

Our comparative analysis suggests that major differences in feedback culture may not be located in national approaches, but in local disciplinary, institutional and pedagogic contexts. While there does seem to be greater involvement of students in feedback than might be acknowledged in media discussions, there is some considerable way to go before practices recommended in the current literature are extensively adopted.

Implications

Our data represent the first international exploration of the use of 'old' and 'new' paradigm feedback processes. Our comparative case studies illustrate that the dominant model of practice in both countries aligns with the 'old' paradigm, which arguably minimises the impact of feedback on student learning. Many practices identified can with relatively little redesign be modified to incorporate features that research suggests may have a positive effect on student learning and involve students more actively. Examples of such adjustments will be discussed, alongside consideration of systemic differences between the UK and Australia that might account for some of the observed findings. The conditions needed to support a theoretical and practical paradigm shift towards a student-focused model of feedback will also be discussed. These changes are important not just for pragmatic reasons relating to staff workload, but also in response to increasing debates around learning gain, employability and the lifelong legacy and sustainability of higher education.

References

Boud, D. (2007). Reframing assessment as if learning were important. In D. Boud & N. Falchikov (Eds.), *Rethinking assessment in higher education: Learning for the longer term* (pp. 14-25).

London: Routledge.

Boud, D. and Molloy, E. (2013). Rethinking models of feedback for learning: the challenge of design. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38, 6, 698-712.

Carless, D. (2015). *Excellence in University Assessment: Learning from award-winning practice*.

London: Routledge.

- Carless, D., Salter, D., Yang, M., & Lam, J. (2011). Developing sustainable feedback practices. *Studies in Higher Education, 36*(4), 395-407.
- Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). Visible learning: A synthesis of 800+ meta-analyses on achievement. *Abingdon: Routledge*.
- Medland, E. (2016). Assessment in higher education: drivers, barriers and directions for change in the UK. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 41*(1), 81-96.
- Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(5), 501-517.
- Orrell, J. (2008). Assessment beyond belief: the cognitive process of grading. In A. Havnes and L. McDowell (Eds.), *Balancing Dilemmas in Assessment and Learning in Contemporary Education* (pp.251-263). London: Routledge.
- Robinson, S., Pope, D., & Holyoak, L. (2013). Can we meet their expectations? Experiences and perceptions of feedback in first year undergraduate students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 38*(3), 260-272.
- Williams, J., & Kane, D. (2009). Assessment and feedback: Institutional experiences of student feedback, 1996 to 2007. *Higher Education Quarterly, 63*(3), 264-286.
- Winstone, N.E., Nash, R.A., Parker, M., & Rowntree, J. (2017). Supporting learners' agentic engagement with feedback: A systematic review and a taxonomy of recipience processes. *Educational Psychologist, 52*, 17-37.
- Yorke, M., Bridges, P., & Woolf, H. (2000). Mark distributions and marking practices in UK higher education some challenging issues. *Active learning in higher education, 1*(1), 7-27.