

‘F9 Conwy 2 Wednesday 5 December 16.45 – 17.15

‘Teaching Excellence’ or ‘Learning Excellence’?: Strategic Approaches to Assessment Feedback in UK Higher Education (0396)

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There are few dimensions of practice in contemporary Higher Education that receive the same level of scrutiny as assessment and feedback. On the basis of metrics such as the UK National Student Survey, teaching staff on the coal face are often encouraged to pay greater attention to dimensions of assessment and feedback such as the detail and framing of comments, and the turnaround time within which comments are returned to students. Such attempts to improve the quality of assessment feedback focus on the process level, where quality assurance and staff competence in the provision of feedback are of primary concern, in what can be viewed as a transmission-focused model. Alternatively, the literature is calling for a more student-centred approach to assessment feedback, where the primary focus is placed upon students’ engagement with the feedback process, and where the impact of feedback on students’ learning and development is central to endeavours to improve the feedback process (e.g. Carless, 2015). This shift from a cognitivist to a constructivist approach might involve building students’ feedback literacy, facilitating learning through inclusive assessment and feedback processes, or involving students in the assessment process. However, *“approaches to assessment and feedback have remained obstinately transmission-focused, even in contexts where there is general acceptance of more student-centred and participatory teaching practices.”* (O’Donovan, Rust & Price, 2016, p. 939).

The SRHE-funded ‘Cultures of Feedback in Higher Education’ project aimed to explore whether learning-focused assessment and feedback practices can thrive within a metric-driven system striving for the demonstration of excellence, characterised by high levels of accountability. In the earlier stages of the project, interview and questionnaire

methods were used to explore academics' perceptions of the drivers of their approach to feedback; the phase of the project described in this paper sought to understand the more strategic level of operations. Practice is unlikely to move forwards by significant strides if strategic approaches to assessment and feedback are more closely aligned with a transmission model than a learning-focused model. Through a document analysis method, this study sought to examine the common framing of assessment and feedback within three sources of data representing institutional-level approaches to assessment and feedback: Institutional learning and teaching strategies; TEF Submissions; and QAA institutional audit reports. The data reported in this paper represent two key research questions addressed through this study:

1. Does discussion of assessment and feedback in institutional learning and teaching strategies and TEF Provider Submissions have a predominantly process or learning focus?
2. Does TEF grade differentiate institutions on the basis of their assessment and feedback focus?

Methods

Artefacts were collated and analysed according to the Document Analysis method presented by Bowen (2009), to triangulate findings from the earlier phases of the project, where practice 'on the ground' was found to be predominantly transmission-focused. TEF provider submissions and learning and teaching strategies were collated for 132 UK Universities. Using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the documents were first scrutinised for discussion of assessment and feedback practice. From these relevant sections, an initial coding framework was developed through an iterative process. All documents were

coded by two research assistants, before codes were refined to create themes. This was a bottom-up thematic analysis; no pre-existing themes were applied to the data. The themes emerging from this process formed categories that were scrutinised through content analysis.

Findings

Thematic analysis revealed five process-focused themes, and five learning-focused themes pertaining to assessment and feedback practice (see Table 1)

Table 1. Emergent themes

Process-focused themes	Learning-focused themes
Turnaround time	Inclusivity
Quality assurance	Authentic assessment and employability
Training staff in the delivery of feedback	Building assessment and feedback literacies
Student satisfaction	Facilitating learning through feedback
Reducing the burden of assessment	Involving students in assessment and feedback

Within their learning and teaching strategies, 65% of institutions made reference to assessment and feedback; within their TEF submissions, 99% made reference to assessment and feedback. For each institution, each of the themes above was coded as either present or absent within the documentation; the proportion of the identified process-focused and learning-focused themes present in each document were compared using Wilcoxon tests.

Within learning and teaching strategies, there was no significant difference between the prevalence of process-focused discourse ($M = .14$, $SD = .21$) and learning-focused discourse ($M = .15$, $SD = .22$), $Z = .48$, $p = .63$. However, within TEF submissions, there was a significantly stronger process focus ($M = .47$, $SD = .28$) than learning focus ($M = .39$, $SD = .28$), $Z = 2.97$, $p = .003$. This picture was the same regardless of whether an institution had been awarded Gold, Silver, or Bronze in the TEF.

Implications

These findings add to contemporary debates regarding cognitivist versus constructivist approaches within the assessment feedback literature (e.g. Ajjawi & Boud, 2017), offering one potential explanation as to why a transmission-focused approach to feedback continues to dominate practice (Nash & Winstone, 2017). Within their TEF Submissions, Universities were more likely to make reference to the mechanics of the transmission of feedback, than the role of feedback in promoting students' learning. Perhaps it is not surprising that student satisfaction, timeliness, and quality assurance are more frequently discussed given that TEF submissions contextualise metrics such as the NSS Assessment and Feedback scores. Nevertheless, this does provide further evidence for claims that the NSS in its current form assesses the 'quality' of a transmission-focused, not learning-focused, model of feedback (e.g. Nicol, 2010; Nash & Winstone, 2017; Winstone & Pitt, 2017).

The notion of 'excellence' from a cognitivist, transmission-focused perspective is unlikely to foster the learning environments that are most conducive to student learning. Constructivist approaches to learning and feedback are more inclusive and sustainable (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). The TEF submissions provide Universities with an opportunity to make a claim for the excellence of their educational provision. The phrase 'teaching excellence' places primary emphasis on what teachers do. The phrase 'learning excellence' may be more appropriate in shifting focus to the impact of practices on students' learning, rather than the delivery of the practices themselves.

References

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