

Designing for Impact: When Assessment is Grounded in Actionable Feedback

Evangelia Fragouli

Kingston University, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

This study proposes for postgraduate students the Feedback-to-Action Assessment Model that repositions feedback as a dynamic and structured learning intervention, rather than a retrospective commentary. This model is integrated in the module design, it introduces a formative resubmission window, where students apply targeted feedback to revise specific sections of work, submit a short reflective commentary, and receive additional formative support — all within a defined time frame. It incorporates AI tools, comment banks, and peer review to reduce academic burden. A qualitative methodology underpins the study, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Master's students and academic staff at two UK Universities. Findings demonstrate that such structured opportunities foster deeper engagement, and improve students' ability to self-regulate learning. This research presents a policy-relevant innovation in assessment design, proposing a shift from feedback provision to feedback activation, with implications for institutional teaching strategies and inclusive pedagogy in higher education.

Full paper

Introduction

While feedback is widely recognised as a cornerstone of learning in higher education (Sadler, 1989; Nicol & Macfarlane Dick, 2006), its actual impact on postgraduate students' development remains limited. Most students receive feedback after summative assessments, with no opportunity to respond (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011). The disconnect between feedback provision and student uptake is a key challenge in Master programmes, where fast-paced modules and diverse learner profiles demand timely, actionable feedback (Wingate, 2010; Hyland, 2013).

A growing body of research emphasises the importance of feedback literacy, defined as the ability to interpret, apply, and reflect on feedback for future learning (Carless & Boud, 2018; Sutton, 2012). Yet, feedback literacy cannot be assumed — it must be taught and practiced in structured ways (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Molloy, Boud & Henderson, 2020). Simultaneously, academics face increased workload making rich, personalised feedback increasingly difficult to sustain (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Ryan & Henderson, 2018).

To address these dual challenges, this paper introduces the Feedback-to-Action Cycle (FAC), a model that integrates structured revision and reflection into assessment design, supporting feedback use at scale while maintaining pedagogical depth.

Research Questions

1. How do postgraduate students engage with feedback when given structured, time-bound opportunities to revise and reflect?
2. How feasible is the implementation of a feedback-to-action cycle in terms of academic workload and institutional integration?

The Feedback-to-Action Cycle (FAC)

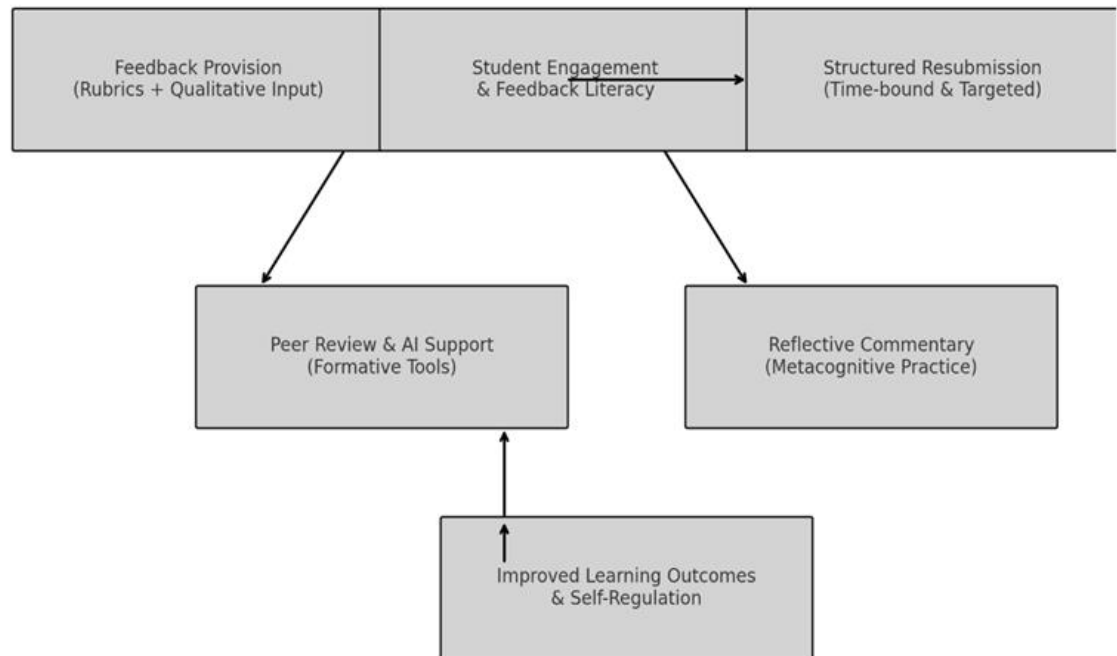
The FAC is a three-stage assessment intervention that embeds feedback engagement into the curriculum:

- **Formative submission** of a section or draft
- **Feedback provision** through tutor comments, structured peer review, and AI-based tools
- **Targeted resubmission** with a **reflective commentary**, where students explain how feedback was interpreted and applied

This structure draws on dialogic and constructivist learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978; Nicol, 2010), positioning students as co-constructors of meaning and active agents in their learning. It operationalises feedback literacy by making reflection **visible and assessable**, rather than optional or implicit (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone & Carless, 2020). Importantly, the model integrates peer and AI input, enabling a **scalable design** that reduces staff burden while maintaining feedback quality (Lu et al., 2018; Noble, 2021).

Unlike informal draft feedback, the FAC is embedded in module timelines, VLE structures, and assessment briefings, making it part of the institutional learning journey — not an add-on (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

Conceptual Framework: Feedback-to-Action Model



Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study design across two UK postgraduate social science modules. At University A (n=60), the model was integrated using structured tutor feedback and AI grammar tools. At University B (n=25), peer feedback was scaffolded with a rubric, followed by a resubmission and reflection. Data from staff interviews and student focus groups were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

- **Student Engagement:** 78% of students at University A and 60% at University B completed the full cycle. Students reported that the opportunity to revise helped them act on feedback meaningfully.

- **Feedback Literacy Gains:** Students reported increased understanding of rubrics and expectations. Reflective commentaries indicated improved self-regulation and academic confidence (Jonsson, 2013; Dawson et al., 2019).
- **Staff Feasibility:** Comment banks, peer review, and AI tools reduced marking time. Staff noted the model's potential for broader use, especially where workload is a barrier to feedback innovation.

Discussion

The FAC repositions feedback as a developmental mechanism within the curriculum. It builds on Carless's (2015) work on learning-oriented assessment and responds to the "feedback disconnect" identified in earlier studies (Winstone et al., 2017). Its unique contribution lies in offering an integrated, replicable model that simultaneously enhances student learning and addresses staff workload.

By requiring students to act on feedback, articulate revisions, and engage reflectively, the model promotes both cognitive and affective engagement — including motivation, clarity, and agency (Sutton, 2012; Molloy et al., 2020).

Recommendations

1. Integrate Formative Resubmission into Assessment Policy

Design assessments with scheduled opportunities to revise and reflect before final submission, aligning with formative principles (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Boud & Soler, 2016).

2. Make Feedback Literacy a Learning Outcome

Include reflective commentaries or feedback logs as marked components to scaffold student metacognition and growth (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017).

3. Use Hybrid Feedback Systems

Combine tutor, peer, and AI tools to balance workload and deepen learning. This supports both feedback quality and operational feasibility (Topping, 1998; Lu et al., 2018).

4. Support Inclusive Assessment Design

Provide structured scaffolds (e.g., visual rubrics, plain language feedback) to aid feedback engagement for students (Hockings, 2010; Hyland, 2013).

5. Embed the FAC Structurally

Incorporate the FAC into module calendars, assessment briefings to ensure student participation and institutional alignment (Nicol, 2010; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

