

Framework for Feedback on Assessment

1. Introduction

Feedback on assessment is an integral feature of effective and efficient teaching and learning and can be one of the most powerful ways in which to enhance and strengthen student learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; Sadler 2010¹). Price et al. (2010, 277)² argue that feedback is “the most important part of the assessment process”. Feedback enables learning by providing information that can be used to improve and enhance future performance.

The purpose of this framework is to establish a series of protocols for feedback which set expectations for feedback on assessment as part of the implementation of the University's learning, teaching and assessment strategy. The intention is not to inhibit the academic success of courses by micro-management or over simplification, but to provide a broad framework to encourage good practice and guidelines for staff and students.

2. Institutional Context

Feedback is one of the most powerful aspects of the student learning experience, yet at Sheffield Hallam, despite significant levels of activity across the institution and a high priority placed on developing feedback practice in each faculty, scores for the three questions focused on feedback have shown little, if any, improvement in the National Student Survey since 2005.

It is important to acknowledge that there is significant variability across the University, its disciplines, courses and even modules in terms of levels of student satisfaction with feedback. Clearly the quality of feedback, as perceived by students, is in some instances high. This is testimony to the hard work and dedication of colleagues across the University, particularly within course and module teams. However, despite these improvements the results of the NSS indicate that there remains dissatisfaction with feedback and, even in areas having excellent teaching and learning scores, the scores on feedback are very low indeed (102 / 108 universities in the NSS).

Timely return of feedback is a critical matter for the University and there is an urgent need for tighter procedures governing feedback and the return of work. Across the University there are widely variable practices, and while guidelines have been issued, there are no clear protocols to ensure consistent practice. There is evidence of student dissatisfaction with unacceptably late returns of coursework and an absence of feedback on examinations (as evidenced in the Student Written Submission 2010).

3. Definitions of summative and formative feedback

The Framework for Feedback on Assessment establishes clarity about how feedback and assessment work to create a rewarding learning experience for students. It is useful to think about this in terms of summative and formative feedback.

¹ Black, P., and D. Wiliam. 1998. Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education* 5, no. 1: 7–74.

Sadler, D.R. 2010. Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, no. 5: 535–50.

² Price, M., K. Handley, J. Millar, and B. O'Donovan. 2010. Feedback: All that effort, but what is the effect? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, no. 3: 277–89.

Formative feedback is used here to refer to all activities which give students explicit information and advice about their progress and, in particular, about how they can improve their work before assessment tasks are attempted and before modules are completed.

Summative feedback is used here to refer to the formal comments made by the academic with responsibility for assessing an individual student's work so that each student is clear about their level of achievement, the way their work has been assessed, and guidance for improvement. As a formal component of assessment design, summative feedback aligns closely and consistently with the course learning outcomes and the assessment criteria.

This distinction is important from an assessment for learning perspective in which students are not passive receivers of feedback, but active participants in a learning process. Feedback should enable each student to learn by analysing and asking questions about the feedback they receive, discussing it with others and connecting it with their prior knowledge. Effective feedback, therefore, is best understood as an iterative process based on dialogue rather than as a monologue in which students simply receive transmitted information. This dialogic relationship between student and tutor is an integral part of the University's Student Charter.

Students are entitled to individual feedback on all assignments. The use of generic feedback, as opposed to individualised feedback, is discouraged where it is not clear how individual students can apply it directly to their own work.

The use of feedback as described in this framework should be understood as a key component in a feedback facilitated learning process. The quality and timing of the feedback are key factors in this process, in which a student's interaction with the feedback is of equal importance in determining its effectiveness. The University's Assessment Review aims to limit the amount of assessment and emphasises the quality of the student experience. Similarly quality, rather than quantity necessarily, should guide our understanding of effective feedback intervention.

4. Guiding Principles

Feedback should be provided on all assessed work and all students should have a positive experience of feedback, whatever their course.

Good feedback is:

- integrated;
- timely;
- clear and focused;
- supportive and inclusive.

5. Protocols

Feedback on assessment must be:

Integrated

- explicitly integrated into curriculum design and review (module and course processes), both formatively and summatively;
- constructively aligned with learning outcomes and assessment criteria;
- given for all assessed work, both examinations and coursework;
- consistent in terms of the of the student's experience of their course.

Timely

- normally³ given within three working weeks (excluding student vacation periods) of the submission deadline for the assessment;

³ It is recognised that there are exceptional situations in which three week turn around is not possible due to externally imposed constraints. Exceptions may be made through discussion with faculty ADADs with reference to the rationale of the University's Assessment Framework.

- given in time to inform subsequent and related assessments and exams.

Clear and Focused

- communicated through assessment criteria which is made available at the start of teaching and discussed with students;
- discussed with students at the start of teaching so that they are aware of the range of feedback opportunities available to them and how they can access this feedback;
- scheduled so that feedback on assessment is returned according to agreed expectations;
- given using plain English so that it is comprehensible and useful;
- indicate the level of the student's achievement in assessments in relation to required standards;
- identify goals for further development and give advice about the steps needed to reach these;
- presented in the context of the student's original work so that the link between the feedback and the work is clear (e.g. the return of annotated scripts);
- discussed by students and tutors for clarification as necessary.

Supportive and Inclusive

- given in ways that are appropriate to the assessment;
- given in ways that are appropriate to the level and needs of the student;
- given in ways that recognise student diversity;
- used to identify achievements as well as areas for improvement;
- enabling and encouraging in order to foster confidence and motivation;
- useful to each student even when generic feedback is given;
- given so that it makes effective use of technology as appropriate.

6. Expectations of students

Students should

- collect, retain and refer back to their feedback to inform subsequent work;
- critically reflect on their feedback and seek to improve their performance;
- engage with feedback opportunities during their course;
- seek clarification of feedback when necessary.

Approved by Academic Board on 1 May 2012