

# What makes good feedback good?

## Authors:

**Berry M. O'Donovan**

**Birgit den Outer**

**Margaret Price**

**Andy Lloyd**

## Abstract

HE institutions persistently seek to increase student engagement and satisfaction with assessment feedback, but with limited success. This study identifies the attributes of good feedback from the perspective of recipients. In a distinctive participatory research design, student participants were invited to bring along actual examples of feedback that they perceived as either 'good' or bad' to 32 interviews with student researchers. Findings highlight the complex interdependency and contextual nature of key influences on students' perspectives. The feedback artefact itself, its place in assessment and feedback design, relationships of the learner with peers and tutors, and students' assessment literacy all affect students' perspectives. We conclude that standardising the technical aspects of feedback, such as the feedback artefact or the timing or medium of its delivery is insufficient: a broader consideration of all key domains of influence is needed to genuinely increase student engagement and satisfaction with feedback.

## Keywords

Feedback; Assessment; Staff-student partnerships; Student satisfaction; Student engagement,

## **Introduction and background**

What makes good feedback good is a conundrum. Numerous studies have investigated how feedback works, the factors that make it effective, and barriers that undermine the feedback product and process (see for example Hattie and Timperley 2007; Winstone et al. 2016). In addition, there have been many institutional and programme initiatives designed to improve the feedback product to support student learning. Higher education institutions, often in response to student surveys, have persistently sought to improve student satisfaction and engagement with feedback hoping to find solutions that are relatively simple and inexpensive to implement. However, National Student Survey results in the UK have obdurately shown scores for satisfaction for assessment and feedback to be much lower than for other aspects of the student experience (HEFCE 2014). Findings from prior research on why this might be the case are not always consistent (Shute 2008), perhaps because of contextual variation and divergent understandings of the feedback product and process. Li and De Luca (2014) suggest that with regard to feedback there is a fundamental dissonance between actual practice, educators and student perspectives. This message is borne out in a large-scale study by Dawson et al. (2018), which identifies the starkly different views held by students and educators on the salient characteristics of quality feedback.

The study reported here investigates undergraduates' perspectives on the quality of assessment feedback that they had received in two contrasting UK institutions, a post-92 university and a member of the 'Russell Group', and in two contrasting disciplines, business and biological science. This research differs from prior studies of feedback in two significant ways. Firstly, a participatory research approach is taken in which students contribute as both participants and researchers to identify and evaluate domains of influence that shape judgements on the quality of assessment feedback. Secondly, student perspectives are made concrete and realistic through discussion of authentic pieces of feedback identified by

participants as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This approach grounded perspectives in actual experiences and situations, and led to unexpected findings. Below, we briefly outline theories on assessment feedback and its influence on the development of student learning. We then describe our methodology in more detail, followed by our findings. We end with a discussion and implications for practice.

## **Feedback as product or process**

In assessment practice across HE institutions there is an assumption that quality of the written feedback product, its timing, and mode of delivery are key to engagement and satisfaction (Price et al. 2010; Winstone and Pitt 2017). There have been a number of studies that advocate practices to improve student engagement with feedback through improving the product, such as content, length, style, and legibility (see for instance Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2001; Orsmond and Merry 2011). However, a more recent body of research suggests a shift from feedback as product to feedback as a developmental process, where written feedback on assessment is only one part of a much larger socially-situated learning dynamic (Nicol 2010; Sadler 2010; Dawson et al. 2018). Here, knowledge and knowing are not possessions of one person gifted to another as an explicit feedback ‘product’ but considered as situated, culturally embedded, socially mediated processes (Wegner and Nuckles 2015). This view is based on different epistemic assumptions than a view of such knowledge as a reified entity that can be acquired and exchanged. These days many scholars conceptualise feedback in dialogic and processual terms (Rust, O’Donovan and Price 2005; Nicol, 2010; Carless et al. 2011), presupposing feedback as an ‘interactive exchange in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified’ (Carless et al. 2011, 397). Consequently, for students to produce high quality work they must be able to

participate effectively in the ways of thinking and practising of the academic community in which the academic standards and attributes of quality are understood, and feedback crafted and received (McCune and Hounsell 2005; Price et al. 2010). Consequently, effective participation in assessment and feedback practice requires students (and staff) to be assessment literate (Price et al. 2012).

## **Assessment literacy**

‘Assessment literacy’ is a relatively recent concept developed as a social-constructivist, learning-centred response to current complexities of assessment (Price et al. 2012; Taylor 2009), and ‘key to learning at all levels’ (Hughes and Hargreaves 2015, 1). Price et al. (2012) conceptualise this literacy as having a good understanding of the nature of assessment and feedback in higher education and how they contribute to learning; recognition of the purposes of different assessment and feedback types; and acknowledgement of the complexities within the assessment and feedback process. They see this kind of literacy as going ‘beyond a grasp of basic principles towards a deeper understanding and engagement’ (Price et al. 2012, 10). Price et al. (2012) and Sadler (2009) highlight the importance of alignment between student and assessor understandings. Assessment literacy is based on *shared* understandings of the nature and role of assessment and feedback (Price et al. 2012). Baxter Magolda argues that such understandings are inextricably entwined with the epistemic assumptions held by students and staff and that ‘students interpret, or make meaning of, their educational experience as a result of their assumptions about the nature, limits, and certainty of knowledge’ (Baxter Magolda 1992, 3). Indeed, O’Donovan (2017) suggests that only students who view knowledge as relative and mutable are likely to be satisfied with feedback on complex, open-ended assignments where definitive and corrective commentary is

unachievable. This problematises student satisfaction with feedback: students may be best placed to comment on their feedback experience but are not necessarily best informed (Price et al. 2010).

## **Method**

The study was reviewed and approved by the Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee. Assessment feedback is the subject of intense scrutiny in higher education as the sector strives to improve both effectiveness and, through this, student satisfaction (O'Donovan, Rust and Price 2016). However, prior research has been dominated by teacher-researchers who interpret student data drawn from surveys and/or interviews with the inevitable outcome of a 'subtle enactment of researcher and teacher authority on the learners' experience' (Welikala and Atkin 2014, 391). By contrast, this study adopted a participatory approach in which eight student research assistants (SRAs) were trained and supervised in participant recruitment, data collection, coding, analysis, and research ethics. Our intention was to democratise the research process and reduce the power distance that exists between academic researchers and student participants and to strengthen student voice and participation beyond that of data provision. The SRAs were recruited across the two participant universities, and were diverse in terms of discipline (music, psychology, business, etc.), level of study (undergraduate, MA and PhD students), and age (the youngest was 22 years of age, the oldest 48), but not gender as coincidentally, only women researchers were recruited. SRAs received payment.

Data collection entailed semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with self-selected students spread evenly between two disciplines, business and biological science, and institutions, Russell Group and post-92, and took place over one academic year. In the total of 32 interviews, each interviewee was asked to select two pieces of feedback they had received,

one which they considered to be ‘good’ - which we had defined as ‘useful’ - and the other which they considered to be ‘bad’ (‘not useful’) and bring them to the interview. We suggest that consideration of authentic pieces of feedback concretise students’ perspectives of quality, ground these perspectives in reality, and enable contextualised explanations. This approach is similar to how assignment exemplars have been shown to embody and surface tacit understandings of academic standards in the work of Rust et al. (2003) and Sadler (2009).

The interviews lasted between 20 minutes to an hour, were recorded and transcribed in full. Transcripts were coded using NVivo and a coding framework, with in part pre-determined coding categories initially developed by the staff researchers and subsequently adjusted by the SRAs during the NVivo coding process. Coding categories included general interview codes, such as interviewees’ experiences, expectations and approaches to learning, and ‘bad’ and ‘good’ feedback example-based codes, such as feedback format, tone, quantity, emotional affect and so on. In addition, the good and bad feedback artefacts were analysed using a discourse analysis framework, drawing on Brown and Glover (2006) and Fairclough (2001). This analysis paid close attention to the language and communication of the feedback provided by markers on the artefacts, including motivational or judgemental wording, or comments that invited dialogue. Each SRA produced a report based on the transcripts of their interviews and coded the feedback artefacts provided by the interviewees. To support SRAs in their report writing a guidance document was drawn up by the staff researchers outlining expected approaches and structure. The guidance note stipulated that the report should be 3-5 pages long and include three sections: general reflections of the research process, data set overview, and the extent to and manner in which the SRA felt their data set could answer the research question. One SRA analysed the coded feedback scripts collectively, looking for patterns across the entire data set. Finally, the staff research team reviewed SRA analyses of the interviews and scripts.

## *Limitations*

Whilst our participatory research design was an attempt to democratise the research process and accentuate the student perspective, we must be cautious against overclaiming student empowerment. As Fielding (2004, 309) comments:

...there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where students and staff meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together

We make limited claim for emancipatory research collaboration - the initial guiding document for analysis was authored by staff researchers as was the final process of thematic analysis and interpretation, albeit in part based on the SRAs' reports as a data source.

Interestingly, Weller et al. (2013) suggest that even within participatory research frameworks student perspectives are often interpreted within professional researcher-generated analytical frameworks. In the co-creation of meaning a tension exists between student and staff researchers in terms of asymmetrical knowledge. On the one hand by dint of experience staff researchers hold more expertise in the collection and interpretation of qualitative data; on the other, student researchers are more attuned to the lived experience of being a student.

However, we as (staff) authors are the ultimate interpreters of the data and analysis presented.

Although we purposely recruited SRAs and student participants from two contrasting disciplines and two different types of universities, the total numbers were too small to say anything meaningful about differences. Our argument for our selection criteria can therefore be found in our desire to include a range of student voices rather than be representative of students in the chosen disciplines or university type.

Basing the interviews around examples of feedback that interviewees had selected did ground discussions and concretise attributes of quality; however, this also may have unintentionally influenced participants to consider feedback as a product rather than a process. This was

mitigated to some extent by broadening out the qualitative interviews beyond a focus on the feedback products, and notwithstanding, findings did highlight the importance of the broader context on influencing student perspectives.

## **Findings**

The factors that influence perceptions of feedback can be categorised in three domains: the feedback itself, the context of the feedback, and the assessment literacy and expectations of students. We now discuss the three domains below and also consider the interdependency of the factors in the domains, including the contextual nature of their relative importance and students' willingness to compensate within and between them.

### ***Domain 1 - The feedback itself***

This domain has traditionally been the focus of advice to improve feedback. Surprisingly, findings from this study indicate that 'good' feedback does not necessarily have to be well crafted. Indeed, 'bad' feedback selections revealed that what is traditionally deemed as high quality feedback (e.g. legibility, length, detail and structure) is alone insufficient to guarantee that it will be perceived as 'good'. Three aspects are identified under this domain.

#### *Technical factors*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 'bad' feedback examples included pieces that did not meet basic standards of legibility and detail, but this was not a common issue. Discourse analysis of the feedback scripts revealed that good feedback pieces included more comments with greater prevalence of explanation. However, there was negligible differences in the comments in relation to types of vocabulary, use of generic or personal style or ticks or similar marks. The relationship between technical factors such as quantity or format and students' judgement about feedback is therefore not straightforward. In addition, there were contradictions in what



was valued. Proforma style feedback was valued by some students because it seemingly made clear where marks were gained or lost. Lengthier, more detailed feedback was valued by others because, as one participant put it, 'it was thorough, there are a lot of comments throughout the text and that's really helpful'. Yet another participant considered the amount of detailed feedback they had received to be 'irritating but helpful' and another 'nit-picking', indicating that student responses to such technical factors can be highly individual.

### *Specificity of feedback*

Participants commented favourably on feedback they felt showed that the marker had *engaged* with their specific piece of work. Thorough and detailed feedback on a piece of work was often experienced as a sign of such engagement. Where this was not the case, students complained that feedback 'could have been cut and pasted' from feedback on other assignments. Simply writing more feedback was not considered sufficient. One student noted:

I think if it's too short then it's not much use, but I think it can be too long as well, if it's not detailed enough or it's not personal enough, if it's too general then some of it might not apply to you.

Students described the tone of some pieces of 'bad' feedback as formal with not much description, worded by one as the marker being a 'bit bored and not making a connection with the work'. Some students situated their desire for particular feedback in a discourse of consumer satisfaction. As one participant put it:

I know they've got 300 students to mark, but you're paying an awful lot of money to go to university, I expect quite a lot of that money back in lecturers' time and things.

One SRA concluded that students want feedback to be detailed and specific not because it will help them learn, but because they want evidence that teachers are spending time on their assignment: 'they have paid £9k a year for teachers to work hard'.

### *Recognition of student effort*

...because I submitted I don't know how many pages [...] and all I got was two words, I'm not really sure what they say, a scribble around one sentence that I wrote, and then two sentences at the end saying why he gave me the mark...

While there was some confusion about the relationship between quality of work and effort it was clear that many students had an expectation that feedback would at least acknowledge the investment they had made in the assignment. Often there was an expectation of a correlation between their time, the marker's effort, and the value of the assignment as an overall proportion of the mark. For instance, if an essay had a word limit of 1,200 words and it only counted for 35%, students didn't expect 'a large amount of feedback', but if considerable effort had been made then there was an expectation of marker effort in return:

...it took so long to do it and it was so hard, it was nice to know that he had gone through it properly and had done it thoroughly

They dislike feedback which they perceive as lazy or rushed. Students were frustrated when their hard work was not recognised: 'He's being quite patronising in the feedback, in that he's saying that it was rushed when no one actually rushed it and I definitely didn't rush it.' In her final report, one SRA observed:

There was some consensus about bad feedback being 'condescending' in terms of the tone, but students could not explain exactly what they consider to be condescending, with interpretation by students influenced by very subtle differences in the ways in which the information is communicated by the lecturers. One participant mentioned that he got the comment 'careless' in a piece of work, which was not further explained, and considered this to reveal 'lack of respect'

To a certain extent factors relating to the feedback itself can be seen as a basic requirement;

there were, however, other domains as influential on what was perceived as good.

## ***Domain 2: The context of feedback***

### *Assessment design*

Students were unlikely to perceive feedback as good if they thought the assessment task was not well designed or ambiguous. In discussing their examples of bad feedback, students complained about the assessment itself, for example the brief was impossible to complete within the word count, an essay title was misleading, and so on.

A participant selected as 'bad' the feedback she received on a presentation that she thought was poorly planned by her tutor. The student felt unable to do her best because the preceding student, presenting on the same topic, covered all of the points she had planned to make.

### *Feedback preconditions*

When talking about their good feedback examples, students described that they knew what was expected of them through, for example, clear criteria, briefing sessions, exemplars and peer or tutor feedback on draft work:

Out of all our topics, I knew what was expected from this one the most, it was made really clear in the guidelines what you need to include, and what you don't need. The tutor also ran a session to talk about things and if you weren't clear you could ask questions about it

A student involved in group presentations evaluated this experience positively because she knew what was expected for the module assessments; the standard of work needed was clear. This was due to the fact that the groups 'were able to decide the criteria that we would be marked on and how it was levelled up'.

Several of the 'good' feedback examples seemed to have been chosen not because the specific piece of feedback was good, but because it represented a link in a chain of good

practices, such as ongoing communication about assessment and feedback that they valued. Students were dissatisfied, even frustrated, with feedback on assignments which they believed were not well explained or communicated. As one student commented:

Nobody understood what we were meant to do, so we had to go over it quite a few times [...], we were confused by the assignment. [...] then we didn't understand why we got the mark [...]

The complete assessment process and, in particular, feedback preconditions, was the most prevalent issue discussed in interviews. Time spent by a lecturer/tutor before, during and after the assignment to explain and clarify were seen to be important. Where more guidance had been wanted the feedback, however detailed, was deemed 'bad'.

#### *Marker predictability*

The interview data suggest that if students do not find the arrangement of *who* marks and provides feedback fair, they are unlikely to perceive the feedback as good.

Several students in this study brought in as 'bad' feedback work that had been marked (and had feedback provided) by someone other than the person who had taught and briefed them, and/or provided formative feedback on the assignment. The need for the marker to have first-hand involvement with delivering the module, i.e. not only being familiar with the subject but also to be familiar with what has been taught, the learning activities, and the students, seemed to be important. However, even where that was the case, inconsistency in treatment looked to undermine positive views of feedback. One student described having two lecturers, and asking for advice on one section of her work from one, but on being marked by the other, and losing points in that section--she felt the other lecturer would have been more favourable. Others described comparing their work and feedback with peers marked by other tutors on the same module and finding inconsistencies. Some students were frustrated that they had been penalised for aspects of their work which did not attract comments in formative

feedback.

### ***Domain 3: Students' assessment literacy and expectations***

#### *Mark expectations*

The question of whether perception of feedback was dependent on the mark awarded was considered. Grades awarded to examples of 'good' feedback ranged from a third (C grade) to a low first (A grade), whilst grades on examples of 'bad' feedback ranged from a third (C grade) to a high first (A+ grade). This suggests that the absolute grade of work generally did not influence students' perceptions of feedback. However the relationship between mark expectation and feedback may be more significant. Not all students had a view about the mark they expected, but for those who did, only one third of the 'bad feedback' examples had grades lower than expected, and again only half of good feedback examples had high or higher marks than expected. Students who received an unexpected grade wanted more from their feedback than where grades met expectations.

Where a higher than expected grade was awarded but the feedback was considered to contain comments without explanation - such as 'good' or tick marks, but no further clarifying comments - the high grade did not compensate for poor quality. Students were frustrated with, and did not trust feedback that provided little rationale for the mark. One student described 'bad' feedback as being 'plucked out of thin air'. Conversely, in the case of a lower than expected grade, positive feelings about the feedback were created if this was sufficiently clear and detailed to enable the student to draw information from it and apply it to future work. Mark expectations can colour what kind of feedback students want, for example a student who was irritated by a conversational comment in her feedback said:

I wanted something to help me improve, because I wasn't at all pleased with the mark, so that comment was a bit pointless I thought

One SRA noted ‘consistency between grades and feedback was a recurrent topic in interviews, and feedback that fails to justify an unexpected mark is not well tolerated by students.’

*Student beliefs and desire for relational feedback*

Some of the responses to the feedback can be captured in terms of student beliefs as to the purpose of feedback. Many students looked to the feedback to provide a justification of the mark as well how they could gain more marks in future assessments. However, students often did not understand the bases on which marks were awarded, or thought that a clear rationale could be given for each percentage mark awarded or lost. One of the participants expressed this confusion quite clearly:

It’s accurate to the presentation, but I don’t know why it’s 66 and not 68 or 62, you know?

Like I say, there’s no direct rationale to the actual mark, which I think a lot of people are more interested in, maybe we shouldn’t be, but ultimately you’ll be trying to come out with a degree, which is good for something, and as much as it’s about the content as well and it’s about learning, I get that and I appreciate that, but also, I don’t know how fair... I don’t know how she came up with 20 out of 30, 19 out of 30 and 27 out of 40. Like why 27?

Another student praised a tutor for teaching to the test --'He taught to the textbook to pass the exam and that is all and I think that is good.' By contrast, a student who saw the point of her degree as not just about learning content but to be able to write good, scientific papers wanted feedback that supported her in doing that.

Unsurprisingly, students reacted emotionally to negative feedback but reactions were tempered by students’ interpretation of the tone of the feedback, their individual resilience and their perceived relationship with the marker. Generally the tone for much feedback that had been categorised as ‘good’ had qualities attributed such as ‘straightforward and

personal'; 'positive and saying what you could build on'; 'neutral; helpful, and not condemning'; 'not very professional but that is nice as it's like they are talking to you'. Similarly, some of the bad feedback was described as 'unapproachable', 'patronising', 'not very conversational'. Tone did not always determine the perception of feedback; a few students chose 'good' feedback examples with a tone they described as 'harsh' or 'picky' or 'Brit,-trying-not-to-be too horrible kind of way!'

Some students with 'good' feedback initially felt 'frustrated', 'demoralised' or 'hurt' but came to appreciate the effort and time put in by the lecturer to mark it, and to understand that they had made mistakes that they could learn from. One student said that feedback had increased her confidence:

Because when it says you've gone wrong, it's not saying, 'You've gone wrong,' it's saying, 'You didn't do as well as you could have here, this is how you could have done better

The emotions generated by 'bad' feedback were more in line with 'indignation' and a feeling of 'unfairness' and of being 'overlooked' or 'ignored'.

Students' desire for 'relational' feedback also shapes their response to tone and other aspects of feedback. A student described as good feedback where the tutor was in conversation with her, another expressed a disappointment that even the most transactional contract had been broken when students were asked to attach a proforma which markers, who weren't necessarily the teachers, then completed.

### ***Interdependency of domains***

Although identifying and differentiating between the various domains, we propose that it is their interaction that shapes students' perception of feedback. We observed that influences can compensate for each other to some extent with perceived strengths compensating for weaknesses in the overall evaluation of whether feedback is 'good' or 'bad'. This

compensation and the ways in which different domains come together changing student satisfaction is illustrated by the following narrative.

A science student, Marina, chose both good and bad feedback examples from the same tutor. She described the tutor as her friend and her favourite lecturer. She found the lectures very interesting, and they included lots of work in the field. For both assignments the student put in a lot of effort.

The first 'good' feedback piece was based on an assignment that involved collecting samples of moss. The student put in effort that was, she felt, 'way more than was expected'. She had a clear idea of what she was expected to do, as there were two lectures about the assignment. She received a high mark, and reported 'the feedback was really easy to understand, because it was all on one sheet, the proforma'. As the feedback reflected her understanding of the quality of the work, the effort she had put into the assignment and her mark expectations it didn't matter that the feedback was brief and lacked specific detail, she still considered it 'good'.

As an example of bad feedback, the student recounted a time when she went to the same tutor for formative feedback and he did not pick up on a problem (lack of scope) which ended up losing her marks in the final assignment. Marina's belief that effort should equal reward meant she was frustrated when her mark, though high, was lower than expected based on her effort and understanding of the formative feedback. Here, she wanted detailed feedback that would show her '*exactly* where she went wrong' and to break down where, specifically, marks were gained and lost. She considered this feedback as 'bad' *because* of the lack of detail.

## **Discussion and implications**

The findings convey the contrasting perspectives, experiences and expectations of individual



students in our data set. This diversity makes the crafting of feedback inherently complex. Student engagement and satisfaction with feedback requires the assessor to account for resilience and emotional responses, recognise the extent of effort (not always visible), as well as account for the assessment literacy including the epistemic assumptions of individual students. So it is difficult for tutors to get it ‘right’, even if given sufficient time to do so, especially when expectations of students may be at odds with sound pedagogy. What a student considers good assessment and feedback is shaped by the assumptions they hold as to the nature and certainty of knowledge (Baxter Magolda 1992), their prior learning experiences (O’Donovan 2017) as well as the timing of their consideration (Carless and Boud 2018). Just getting technical factors right will not ensure student satisfaction with feedback. However, it may not be necessary for tutors to get everything in every domain right for students to perceive feedback as good, it seems that the interaction of domains allows for compensations that can change their overarching view.

In higher education institutions, it is unsurprising that the technical aspects of feedback have been a major focus for improvement as these lie within tutors’ and institutions’ control. Indeed, tangible improvements are also those that can be measured and often demanded by new regimes of accountability and transparency. As UK HEIs strive to compete in a more hostile environment (O’Byrne and Bond 2014), there is growing regulation and control through quality frameworks, which represents an approach that puts more trust in transparent processes that can be monitored and less in professional judgement (Tsoukas 2003).

Other domains may be less easy to address, but are at least as important. This research supports the idea that the comments made on students’ assignments are only a small part of the complexity of good feedback (Evans 2013). There is a need to meet minimum requirements of clarity and detail but improvements to this aspect alone are unlikely to change perceptions of quality. Therefore, devoting precious resources to honing and

perfecting feedback comments might not be the best strategy to enhance student engagement and satisfaction, and it may be more effective to make changes in other domains.

The elements of the context domain - assessment design, pre-feedback conditions and marker predictability - all seem to have the power to skew student perceptions, positively or negatively, and compensate for elements in other domains that may be more or less challenging to address. For example, if marker predictability issues arise through the use of external markers this may be addressed through ensuring external markers are well integrated in the module team including pre-marking, standard-setting activities. Paying attention to assessment design is also worthwhile although not necessarily straight forward (Sadler 2010). It is undoubtedly good pedagogic practice to structure assessment tasks to enable students to take forward their learning from one task to the next (Boud and Molloy 2013) and students do want repeated attempts at similar tasks to gain formative feedback (Dawson et al. 2018). However, if feedback does not align from one task to the next then students can find this both confusing, unfair and inconsistent. And alarmingly there are very few studies of blind marking and feedback that demonstrate such consistency both between markers and even with one marker over time (Bloxham et al. 2016). Assessment design is one of several places identified in this research where measures to improve student satisfaction ratings may differ from practices that support student learning. Many students may want clear assessment tasks to which there is a unambiguous and certain approach and 'correct' answer (O'Donovan 2017) but in complex tasks assessing high-level course objectives this may be inappropriate for their learning development (Sadler 2010; O'Donovan 2017). As Meyer and Land (2005) suggest learning can necessitate an uncomfortable grappling with troublesome knowledge and conceptual transformation, and accordingly it may take time to recognise the quality of good assessment and feedback practices. Consequently, not only do assessment designs need to be coherent and pedagogically appropriate, but students themselves need to be able to

appreciate their qualities and objectives.

The domain that requires a long-term approach, the development of students' assessment literacy including their assumptions on knowledge and learning is also the one that seems to offer the greatest unexploited scope for improvement. Students' approach to learning is critical to how they use their feedback (Evans 2013). We know that successful students use feedback differently and more effectively; it can be argued that these students are 'assessment literate'. Such assessment literacy can help students to enter into productive feedback dialogues with their tutors and therefore makes them more effective learners (Nicol 2010; Carless et al. 2011). However, whilst students build up assessment and feedback literacy through their experience of assessment this is rarely intentionally developed as part of formal curricula (Price et al. 2012). Our study indicates that individual learners may hold different intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, abilities to self-assess, epistemic beliefs, expectations of the tutor-student relationships and levels of resilience, and these are all potential influences on their perceptions of feedback. However, the intentional development of students' assessment literacy may be a good way forward to pull together such divergent perceptions.

Building on prior research, Carless and Boud (2018) convincingly suggest that the development of feedback literacy might include the development of students' evaluative ability through marking practice and peer review, supporting students to manage their emotional response to feedback, and designing processes that encourage students to take action based on their feedback. We suggest that in many courses the development of assessment and feedback literacy will also necessitate an intentional focus on developing students epistemic beliefs to enhance student understanding and thereby satisfaction with feedback on high-level and complex tasks for which feedback *cannot* be as specific and corrective as students holding absolute beliefs about knowledge may want (O'Donovan 2017).

Institution-wide policies, often initiated with all good intentions, can make crude and sweeping generalisations about salient issues in assessment and feedback. Tensions between policy and practice demands and resources are rarely addressed, and often policies can constrain more nuanced solutions or even impose practices that cause problems. For example, the importance of the relational element in students perceiving feedback as ‘good’ is constrained in practice by anonymised marking. Anonymised marking is now policy in many institutions, along with teaching and module evaluation processes that are based on ideas of ‘service’ levels and standardising practices. These processes can steer staff and students away from developing personal teacher-learner relationships that seem to make assessment outcomes and feedback comments more palatable to students, and undermine the joint responsibilities of both tutors and students. As Winstone et al. (2017) suggest, students may recognise that paying attention to feedback can facilitate their learning, but many underplay their own role in realising such development. Effective practices are distinctive in different contexts and arguably teachers need flexibility to adopt locally appropriate practices and the knowledge and awareness to recognise what these might be. This of course assumes assessment literacy among staff is necessary both to adopt appropriate practices and to support the development of assessment literacy in students.

## **Conclusion**

This research specifically sought the student perspective on what makes feedback good. We did this by asking students to bring in authentic examples of feedback and talk about them to students research assistants, the findings from which acknowledged the situatedness of feedback and the divergence of individual perspectives on what makes ‘good’ feedback good. We consider that this distinctive research method made students responses to what makes good feedback good both realistic and contextual. It is perhaps too easy in the abstract for students to want assessment feedback to accomplish everything in all contexts. The findings

reflect a broader categorisation of influences that has helped us examine where efforts should and - perhaps more importantly - should not be focused to improve student satisfaction and engagement with feedback.

This work indicates that domains of influence are varied and difficult to prioritise, nor are they mutually exclusive, there are strong interdependencies between them. Domains of influence are context-dependent and those that lie beyond the feedback artefact itself such as the assessment context and the assessment literacy of students are important in terms of student satisfaction and engagement with feedback. As staff make decisions about where to focus their time and effort in providing feedback an overemphasis on technical factors at the expense of contextual elements such as the assessment design and feedback preconditions risks undermining student engagement with feedback. There is a need to look beyond the confines of feedback as a technical and time-bound product and explore students' perceptions of feedback within the broader context of their educational learning experience.

## References

- Baxter Magolda, M. B. 1992. *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. [1]
- Bloxham, S., B. den Outer, J. Hudson, and M. Price. 2016. "Let's stop the pretence of consistent marking: exploring the multiple limitations of assessment criteria." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41 (3): 466-481. doi: 10.1080/02602938.2015.1024607
- Boud, D., and E. Molloy. 2013. "Rethinking models of feedback for learning: The challenge of design." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (6): 698–712.  
doi:10.1080/02602938.2012.691462.
- Brown, E. and C. Glover. 2006. "Evaluating written feedback." In *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*, edited by C. Bryan, 81-91. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Carless D. and D. Boud. 2018. "The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 43 (8): 1315-1325, doi: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354.
- Carless, D., D. Salter, M. Yang, and J. Lam. 2011. "Developing sustainable feedback practices." *Studies in Higher Education* 36 (4): 395–407. doi:10.1080/03075071003642449.
- Dawson, P., M. Henderson, P. Mahoney, M. Phillips, T. Ryan, D. Boud, and E. Molloy. 2018. "What makes for effective feedback: staff and student perspectives." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education Online* 30 April. 25-36.  
doi.10.1080/02602938.2018.1467877.
- Evans, C. 2013. "Making Sense of Assessment Feedback in Higher Education." *Review of Educational Research* 83 (1): 70–120. doi:10.3102/0034654312474350.
- Fairclough, N. 2001. "Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research." In

*Methods in critical discourse analysis*, edited by R. Wodak, and M. Meyer, 121-138.

London: Sage.

Fielding, M. 2004. "Transformative Approaches to Student Voice: Theoretical Underpinnings, Recalcitrant Realities." *British Educational Research Journal* 30 (2): 295–311. doi:10.1080/0141192042000195236.

Hattie, J. and H. Timperley. 2007. "The power of feedback". *Review of Educational Research* 77 (1): 81-112. doi: 10.3102/003465430298487.

Higgins, R., P. Hartley, and A. Skelton. 2001. "Getting the message across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback." *Teaching in Higher Education* 6 (2): 269–274. doi:10.1080/13562510120045230.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2014) "UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National student survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013": *HEFCE*.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180319115047/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/>.

Hughes, G. and G. Hargreaves. 2015. "Editorial Assessment Literacy: Understanding Relationships Between Feedback and Learning." *London Review of Education* 13(3): 1-2. doi: 10.18546/LRE.16.3.09

Li, J and R. De Luca (2014) "Review of assessment feedback." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (2): 378-393, doi: 10.1080/03075079.2012.709494.

McCune, V. and D. Hounsell. 2005. "The development of students' ways of thinking and practising in three final-year biology courses." *Higher Education* 49 (3): 255-289. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-6666-0.

Meyer, J.H.F. and R. Land, R. 2005. "Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning."

*Higher Education* 49 (3): 373-388. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5.

Nicol, D. 2010. "From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (5): 501–517. doi: 10.1080/02602931003786559.

O'Byrne, D. and C. Bond. 2014. "Back to the future: the idea of a university revisited".

*Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 36 (6): 571-584. doi:

10.1080/1360080X.2014.957888.

O'Donovan, B. (2017) "How students' beliefs about knowledge and knowing influence their satisfaction with assessment and feedback." *Higher Education*, 74(4):617-633.

doi:10.1007/s10734-016-0068-y.

O'Donovan, B., C. Rust, and M. Price. 2016. "A scholarly approach to solving the feedback dilemma in practice." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 41 (6): 938-949.

doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1052774.

Orsmond, P. and S. Merry. 2011. "Feedback alignment: effective and ineffective links between tutors' and students' understanding of coursework feedback." *Assessment &*

*Evaluation in Higher Education* 36 (2): 125-136. doi.10.1080/02602930903201651.

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 (3): 277–289. doi:

10.1080/02602930903541007.

Price, M., C. Rust, B. O'Donovan, K. Handley, and R. Bryant. 2012. "Assessment literacy:

*The foundation for improving student learning*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning



Development.

Price, M., Handley, K., & Millar, J. 2011. "Feedback: Focusing attention on engagement". *Studies in Higher Education*, 36, 879-896. doi:10.1080/03075079.2010.483513.

Rust, C., M. Price, and B. O'Donovan. 2003. "Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28 (2): 147-64. doi: 10.1080/0260293032000045509.

Rust, C., B. O'Donovan, and M. Price. 2005. "A social constructivist assessment process model: how the research literature shows us this could be best practice." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 30 (3): 231-240. doi: 10.1080/02602930500063819.

Sadler, D. R. 2009. "Grade integrity and the representation of academic achievement." *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (7): 807-826. doi: 10.1080/03075070802706553.

Sadler, D. R. 2010. "Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (5): 535–550. doi: 10.1080/02602930903541015.

Shute, V. 2008. "Focus on Formative Feedback." *Review of Educational Research* 78 (10): 153–189. doi.org/10.3102/0034654307313795.

Taylor, L. 2009. "Developing Assessment Literacy." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 29: 21–36. doi: 10.1017/S0267190509090035.

Tsoukas, H. 2003. "Do we really understand Tacit Knowledge?" In *Handbook of Organisational Learning and Knowledge Management*, edited by M. Easterby Smith and M. Lyles, 324-342. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Wegner, E. and M. Nuckles. 2015. "Knowledge acquisition or participation in communities of practice? Academics' metaphors of teaching and learning at the university." *Studies in*

*Higher Education*, 40 (4): 624-643. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2013.842213.

Welikala, T., and C. Atkin. 2014. "Student co-Inquirers: The Challenges and Benefits of Inclusive Research." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 37 (2): 390–406. doi:10.1080/1743727X.2014.909402.

Weller, S., G. K. Domarkaite, C. Lam, and L. Metta. 2013. "Student-faculty co-Inquiry Into Student Reading: Recognising SoTL as Pedagogic Practice." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 7 (2): 1–16. doi:10.20429/ijstl.2013.070209.

Winstone, N.E., and E. Pitt. 2017. "Feedback is a two-way street. So why does the NSS only look one way?" *Times Higher Education*. September 14. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/feedback-two-way-street-so-why-does-nss-only-look-one-way>.

Winstone, N. E., R.A. Nash, J. Rowntree, and M. Parker. 2016. "It'd be useful, but I wouldn't use it: barriers to university students' feedback seeking and recipience". *Studies in Higher Education*. 42 (11): 2026-2041. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2015.1130032.