



DEVELOPING GOOD PRACTICE IN THE PROVISION OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK FOR DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

For many distance learning students, feedback on assessed coursework is often the only communication they have with their department. As such, feedback should play a fundamental role in the teaching and learning process, but there is a concern that this feedback may not be as effective as intended. There are both pedagogic and practical issues concerned with the provision of feedback, such as the quality of feedback in terms of relevance, comprehension and comprehensiveness, the quantity of feedback provided, and practical issues such as the time taken to provide the often detailed written feedback and the implications this can have on future pieces of coursework.

PROJECT AIMS

1. To establish the principles of effective feedback
2. To examine the current processes (pedagogic/practical) of providing feedback to distance learning students
3. Drawing on the analysis of the above, to develop principles of good practice in relation to the provision of effective feedback

METHODS

The research was conducted at the University of Leicester within four Departments/Schools (Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Department of Criminology, Management School and the School of Law). Course leaders were interviewed and course materials reviewed. 354 students completed an on-line survey, 22 students took part in follow-up telephone interviews and 8 tutors were interviewed.

KEY FINDINGS ARE SUMMARISED AS FOLLOWS:

PURPOSE OF FEEDBACK

The majority of students thought the purpose of feedback is:

- To tell me how to improve my work in future
- To tell me how I could have improved an assessment

FEEDBACK ON PROGRESS DURING THE MODULE

- One third of students did not know that formative feedback is available during their module.
- 11% of those that did know it was available did not feel able to ask for feedback.
- Just 4% of respondents claimed they did not want feedback on their progress
- Students generally did not acknowledge any formative feedback they receive as 'feedback'; they simply classed this as 'guidance'

FEEDBACK ON ASSESSED WORK

- 78% were satisfied with the feedback they received
- 18% were not satisfied
- 37% of students felt unable to talk to a member of staff about their feedback
- 37% stated they 'always' received their feedback in time for it to be useful for their next assignment
- The majority of students were pleased when they received the feedback
- 34 students were generally disappointed
- 28 felt confused due to contradictory comments
- 8 felt confused as they did not understand the comments
- 9 were upset by the comments
- 6 felt angry as a result of perceived unjust comments

WHAT DO STUDENTS DO WITH THEIR FEEDBACK?

- All respondents claimed to read their feedback
 - 43% used these to see how they can help with next assignment
 - 27% go back over their previous essay with the feedback comments
 - 26% just read them
- Few comments have been made on feedback assisting knowledge acquisition or providing a deeper understanding of the subject

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Based on the review of course materials, interviews with course leader, tutors and students and the student questionnaire, five stages during each module were defined where a dialogue between tutor and student could be held and feedback could be requested/provided. At each of these stages, barriers were identified that can impact upon effective feedback being sought/provided.

Stage		Barrier
1	Preparing for the assessment	Not talking the same language
2	Guidance sought and feedback provided	Being on the wrong track (or not knowing you are on the right one)
3	Feedback provided on assessment	Ineffective feedback
4	Guidance sought on feedback	Inability to seek guidance/clarification
5	Guidance provided on feedback	We think it's all over

Recommendations have been made at each stage in an attempt to overcome these barriers and these are discussed in full in the report.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The presentation of information should be top-loaded so that expectations are clearly understood and the potential for guidance and feedback is clearly communicated to students from the very beginning of the programme, through a variety of mediums
- Students should be informed what the department views as the purpose of feedback and students should be instructed on the ways in which they can use their feedback
- Course materials should be reviewed for clarity and coherence. Departments should try to ensure that course materials and communication with students are constructed with 'empathy' in mind
- Feedback/guidance needs to be received in time for it to be useful
- Ensure consistency in feedback, both in terms of the mark matching the tone of the comments and consistency across modules
- Establish a relationship between academic members of staff and students, which should provide positive benefits to both
- Remember that the process is ongoing throughout the whole course of studies

1. BACKGROUND

The provision of feedback to the approximately 700 distance learning post and undergraduate students registered with the Department of Criminology is organised around the assumption that written feedback on graded assessments, which contains both summative and formative elements, is an effective form of feedback. No formal mechanisms are in place for the provision of formative feedback of any kind during periods of study for preparation of written assessments. If such feedback were to be provided, it would be at the request of the individual student. Consequently, written feedback is both the primary means of communication with the students and the primary method of teaching.

According to Morgan and O'Reilly (1999:74), feedback is constructive where it 'creates a dialogue between teacher and learner; helps learners to identify areas in which they can further develop; teaches the learner new skills; [and] prompts reflective and self-evaluative thinking.' Rowntree (1990:328) suggests that a thorough and rigorous engagement with student assessments on the part of tutors can produce written feedback that can further these aims and enhance the learning experience. While, for example, external and internal tutors¹ within the Department of Criminology generally provide written feedback in some quantity, the quality of that feedback can be

¹ Academic members of staff, internal and external markers shall be referred to as tutors throughout.

compromised by the fact that its content is governed by generic assessment criteria and headings. It can also be compromised by the tutor not knowing whether the feedback is read, understood or acted upon.

The 'learning pay-off' (Race, 2005: 100) of feedback depends upon more than its substance; it also depends upon the efficiency of delivery. So, for example, modes of formative and summative feedback which utilise self and peer assessment are efficient, according to Race (2005:100-3) not only because they are a valuable means by which students learn how to identify their strengths and weaknesses but also because, as distinct from one-to-one provision, they are a means by which limited teaching resources can be maximised. The production of written feedback is labour intensive and does not demand a response from and consequently does not create a dialogue with the student. There is a large financial cost in payment to external tutors to produce feedback which may not be read or be acted upon by students, or be constructive in terms of its content.

It is suggested, therefore, that two discrete but interrelated elements combine to make feedback effective – effectiveness in relation to its content and to its delivery. These will inform and underpin the data collection, analysis and evaluation.

There were ten departments/schools (at the time of bidding for funding) within the University that deliver distance learning programmes and we understand that that it is second only to the Open University in terms of the provision of postgraduate distance learning in the UK. There is no formalised and consistent means of providing feedback across the departments² in terms of content, delivery and cost. As a result of this research, the Department of Criminology is able to learn from the experiences of other departments. It is also likely that other departments taking part in the research may be able to benefit from the good practice recommendations. This is one of the outcomes of the research. Other distance learning providers should also find the discussion and recommendations of interest.

2. PROJECT AIMS

1. To establish the principles of effective feedback
2. To examine the current processes (pedagogic/practical) of providing feedback to distance learning students
 - a. What role does feedback play within a distance learning context?
 - b. How do tutors construct their feedback?
 - c. How do students experience this feedback?

² The term 'departments' is used when referring to the participating academic groups.

3. Drawing on the analysis of the above, to develop principles of good practice in relation to the provision of effective feedback
 - a. To inform the development of modes of providing feedback for distance learning students
 - b. To implement these modes across programmes within the Department of Criminology
 - c. To provide recommendations for the Department of Criminology and other Departments/Schools/Faculties

4. METHODOLOGY

Written feedback and its application is a little understood process and therefore demands an in-depth exploration of the experiences of both the students and those concerned with the marking of their work, and of the interaction between them.

The research methods used consisted of the following:

1. A review of the relevant literature
2. A survey of current students who had submitted coursework and received at least one piece of feedback
3. Semi-structured interviews with a selection of student respondents to the survey
4. Documentary analysis of a sample of programme material to inform the evaluation of current feedback provision and the development of good practice
5. Semi-structured interviews with first and second markers across the relevant departments

At the initial stage of requesting funding, all departments offering distance learning courses at the time were approached for an indication of whether they would be willing to take part in the research. The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, School of Law, and the School of Management responded. Once funding was granted these were the groups (together with the Department of Criminology) that took part in the research. The number of distance learning students varies greatly within the departments, but not all distance learning students within the departments had the opportunity to take part in the research (except for Criminology and Archaeology and Ancient History).

Initial interviews were conducted with academic representatives from each department. Following this, an online student questionnaire containing open and closed questions was drafted, piloted and opened (using Bristol Online Surveys) which students were asked to complete. In total, 354 students completed the survey. It is difficult to provide an overall response rate as we cannot be sure how many students saw the original request for participation (the mode of this varied across

departments). This is particularly the case in Management where, compared to the overall amount of students, only a very small amount responded. However, for the Department of Criminology all current distance learning students were emailed, via Blackboard and a notice was put on each course Blackboard site. The response rate for Criminology was approximately 30 per cent. Responses may depend whether students check their University email account and Blackboard site on a regular basis, as the questionnaire was open for approximately two months (part of this was over the Christmas period). It is quite possible that some students in all Departments did not see the request.

The questionnaire asked whether students would be prepared to take part in a follow-up telephone interview. Follow-up telephone, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 students. These students were chosen on the basis of their availability. Respondents were a mix of overseas and home students. Eight tutors (both internal and external) were interviewed, again selected on the basis of their availability. Some of these were telephone interviews, others were face to face. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

There is insufficient statistical power in the data from the questionnaires to make results significant for comparisons between departments. Therefore, for the purpose of this report, student responses will not be broken down into departmental groups.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gibbs and Simpson note it is acknowledged for many students, the only contact they have with their tutor is through feedback. They state that students can manage 'without much, or even any, face-to-face teaching, but they cannot cope without regular feedback on assignments' (2004:9). Feedback provided for distance learning students can vary to that which a campus based student may receive, where Gibbs and Simpson (2004) note that there has been a decline in the quantity and quality of feedback to campus based students. This has tended not to be the case for distance learning students.

There is more literature providing information on how to give feedback to students, rather than a deeper discussion on the fundamentals of effective feedback. For example, Webb and Sanders (cited in Stothart, 2007a) note that three suggestions for improvement seem to be the optimal number when providing feedback to students; any less is insufficient and any more might be too many. They also suggest starting the feedback with a positive comment, rather than a negative one that might depress the student. Nicol, in Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol, Ross and Smith (2004:6) has identified seven broad principles of good feedback practice, namely that it:

1. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
2. Encourages teachers and peer dialogue around learning
3. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards expected)
4. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning
6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching

Glover and Brown (2006:2) summarise from Gibbs and Simpson that four conditions under which feedback is likely to be effective are when it:

- Is frequent, timely, sufficient and detailed enough;
- Can be linked to the purpose of the assessment task and criteria;
- Is understandable, given the students' level of sophistication; and
- Focuses on learning rather than marks by relating explicitly to future work and tasks.

They note from their research that it is clear that the 'four conditions under which feedback is likely to be effective ... are not met as frequently as originally believed' (2006: 13). They noted there was a lack of explanatory feedback given to students and state 'For feedback to be formative it should involve not only identification by the learner of the gap between the desired goal and present state, but also provide the information needed to close the gap with sufficiently explanation to enable students to use this information' (2006: 14).

Many of the suggestions for good feedback may seem reasonably obvious and it is difficult to get away from a 'checklist' type approach to a consideration of how tutors/tutors construct the feedback and how students receive it. Trying to establish whether/how feedback has an effect on the learning process is much more difficult to establish, and some of the reasons why this is so are discussed below.

It can be argued that students do not necessarily know what to do with feedback; how to use it to learn and help with future study. Sadler (1998) for example, has recommended that students may need to be taught how to use feedback 'to develop meta-cognitive control' (cited in Gibbs and Simpson, 2004-05: 25) in order to gain control over their own learning. In this way, students will be able to 'monitor their own performance' which is, according to Sadler, 'the ultimate goal of feedback' (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004-05: 25).

There has long been a suggestion that students do not read the feedback comments provided by tutors on their work (see Hounsell, 1987, Wotjas, 1998 and Jackson, 1995 cited in Gibbs and Simpson, 2004-05). Saunders (2007 cited in Stothart, 2007b) found that reading of comments was mark-related for three quarters of the students in his study. Generally, students were found to read the feedback if they had either received a fail, or a bad mark in an assignment. Conversely, those that had done particularly well would also read their feedback, as a confidence boost. Those most likely not to read the feedback were students (undergraduates in this case) who received marks in the region of 45-65 (general pass marks). This may make somewhat disheartening reading to tutors as for most programmes, the majority of marks are likely to be general pass marks within that range. This suggests that students either do not feel the need to read comments and reflect upon these, or perhaps do not want to face up to their shortcomings, which is an option that failing students cannot take as they will have to resubmit their assignment.

Glover and Brown (2006: 12) found that tutors generally believed that their efforts spent producing feedback were wasted due to the belief that students are 'only interested in their marks and take little or no notice of the feedback given'. However, they noted that this was not supported by the students in the study, who did claim to look through their feedback. There may be a difference between campus based and distance learning students, as distance learning students rely heavily on written feedback on their assignments as they do not receive other forms of feedback and support so readily. Hyland's research (2001) led her to also question tutors. She found that the tutors were often unsure as to the value of the feedback they gave and were not confident that students acted on it, or indeed, knew how to act on it. However, tutors did see a clear role for feedback in terms of

providing support and encouragement. Hyland found that the four tutors in her study were not in agreement as to what, and which aspect, constitutes the most helpful feedback for students. The research shows that both different students and different tutors felt different aspects were most useful. She notes that there is a clear opportunity for a mismatch of wants and expectations and what they receive. Brown (2007) agrees with Laurillard (2002) that feedback should relate to individual students and their needs, as there can be no one overall formula. However, within a distance learning context, this is less likely to be possible, particularly if, as in most cases, different assignments are marked by different tutors who in most cases will not know the student (this is also perhaps unlikely to actually happen for campus based students).

School-based research (Black and Wiliam, 1998 cited in Gibbs and Simpson, 2004-05) showed that students were more likely to use feedback to guide learning and to read the feedback more carefully if it is received without a mark. This would clearly be more resource intensive administratively. One of the objectives of this research is to establish whether students indeed read their feedback, and if they do, what they then do with it. Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05:17) have suggested that feedback may 'need to be quite regular, and on relatively small chunks of course content, to be useful. One piece of detailed feedback on an extended essay ... after ten weeks of study is unlikely to support learning across a whole course very well'. Certainly within the Department of Criminology, this is the most likely form of feedback that students receive; even though feedback is available at other times.

Gibbs and Simpson note five steps that could be taken to try to engage students with their feedback:

1. Asking them what they want and then only providing feedback in that respect
2. Provide feedback but no marks
3. Require self-assessment 'so that students pay attention to whether teachers' views correspond to their own'
4. Adopt a two-stage approach, so that feedback is provided on the first stage that is intended to enable the student to improve the quality of the work for the second stage submission
5. Give the grade only after self-assessment and tutor feedback has been completed

Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05:24)

They further note that feedback, even when read by students, may not lead to an improvement in the approach to future work. They believe there are a number of reasons why this might be the case:

- Feedback may come too late to be acted on by students
- Feedback may be backward looking – addressing issues associated with material that will not be studied again, rather than forward-looking and addressing the next study activities or assignments the student will engage with
- Feedback may be unrealistic or unspecific in its aspirations for student effort (e.g. 'read the literature' rather than 'for the opposite view, see Smith Chapter 2 pages 24-29')
- Feedback may ask the student to do something they do not know how to do (e.g. 'be more Sociological' or 'express yourself more clearly')
- Feedback may be context-specific and only apply to the particular assignment rather than concerning generic issues such as study skills or approaches that generalize across assignments
- Feedback may be discouraging and lead to less study effort rather than more
- There may be no follow-up to check if students have taken any action, so students can ignore feedback with impunity

Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05:25)

Brown's (2007) research found that students sometimes felt that feedback comments were insufficient, too vague or lacked a personal perspective. If a student does not understand the comments, they cannot use them in order to develop further. Brown's participants also wanted to see consistency in their feedback in terms of what is covered by the feedback. Brown found that the students in his research concluded with Ivanic *et al* (2002), wanting to place feedback at the beginning of a process, rather than the end of one. Ivanic *et al* (cited in Brown, 2007) also recommended that students should engage with the feedback and then offer a response (that would likely be oral rather than written). In this way they suggest that feedback be viewed as 'the beginning of a dialogic process rather than as a process of correction which terminate with their comments' (Brown, 2007: 37). In terms of generating a dialogue between student and tutor, Hyland's research found a general reluctance for telephone tutorials, which was only partly due to practicalities.

Feedback is often seen as being a means of facilitating knowledge (amongst other things). Hyland (2001) provides a review of studies on feedback to distance learning students. Within this, the issue of creating a dialogue between tutors and students is noted. Jarvis (1978 cited in Hyland, 2001) suggested this and Carnwell (1999 cited in Hyland, 2001: 234) suggests 'a major outcome of such a dialogue should be greater student autonomy and independence via the encouragement of a deeper, reflective approach to learning'. Cole, Coates and Lentell (1986 cited in Hyland, 2001) appear to agree, suggesting that students should be given an opportunity to respond to the feedback, which would help to create a dialogue.

In terms of what students want from feedback, Hyland (2001) notes that detailed feedback is particularly desired and this point is substantiated by Roberts (1996), Rice, Mousley and Davis (1994) and Stevenson, Sarder and Naylor (1996 all cited in Hyland, 2001). Hyland's research (with distance learning language students) found that 57 percent of respondents focused on comments summarising strengths and weaknesses, 28 percent focused on intext comments and corrections and just 15 percent said they paid most attention to the mark. She also found that the majority of respondents made 'active use' of feedback (Hyland, 2001:242).

It is clear that feedback involves communication. Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001:272) state that this 'process of feedback as communication is inherently problematic'. They go on to note that 'salient factors in feedback are related to issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse' and that 'tutors and students conceive of feedback in qualitatively different ways' therefore resolving issues such as delivery, language etc will make little difference. When discussing conversation in institutional settings, Hutchby and Wooffitt claim the 'institutional interaction is systematically asymmetrical' (1998:160). Students are complicit in reproducing asymmetry – complicit in maintaining the situation for example in which they do not follow up feedback with tutors. In areas where there are no formal institutional constraints, students may act as if there were. Although not directed at distance learning, Webb (cited in Stothart, 2007a) suggests that the self confidence of students from non-traditional backgrounds may be more likely to be damaged than that of a middle class student attending an 'old' university. Although Leicester is an 'old' university, many of our distance learning students are from non-traditional backgrounds and so may be more similar to the type of students Webb refers to who may be more likely to lose confidence as a result of negative comments.

Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001:270) suggest that we need to 'pay more attention to feedback as a *process of communication*' in order to establish how feedback could achieve its potential within the learning process. They state that we have to move beyond the simplistic model of communication to a consideration of 'external interferences' that can impede the process. They note factors such as:

- The consumerism that mediates students' receptiveness to feedback
- The structure of university of assessment system
- The timeliness of feedback
- Heavy tutor and student workloads and modularisation can disrupt the flow of information between tutor and student.

They suggest there is a 'preoccupation with structural problems' (Higgins *et al*, 2001:272). Hounsell (1997) and McCune (1999) have both suggested that HE students 'may struggle to access the particular discourses underpinning tutors' comments' as this type of communication is not necessarily based upon a shared understanding (cited in Higgins *et al*, 2001:272). They end by noting that feedback

may need to be more dialogical and ongoing. Discussion, clarification and negotiation between student and tutor can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them, and development their understandings of academic terms and appropriate practices before or as they *begin* to write

(Higgins *et al*, 2001:272)

Feedback is much discussed and there are many practical and pragmatic suggestions made on how to provide more effective feedback to students. There are also deeper issues concerning power, emotion, discourse and learning styles, for example, that seem more difficult to identify due to individual student and tutor differences. Ultimately, it may often be related to the individual student as to what they do with it, how they reflect on this and what action they take, rather than the actual feedback provided. This is a difficult situation to overcome and is perhaps especially difficult in term of distance learning students due to their lack of physical presence at the University.

With distance learning in particular, all of these issues could easily be relevant. However, what is apparent is that there are some suggestions as to what can hamper the provision of effective feedback. Whether feedback is 'effective' or not can depend upon whose notion of effective is being discussed – student or tutor. There is though, general agreement that feedback is a form of communication and that ideally it should form part of a dialogue, rather than stand alone advice.

6. RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Students were asked a variety of questions, both in the questionnaire and the interviews to establish what they think effective feedback amounts to. Tutors were also asked what they felt effective feedback to be. It should be acknowledged that the term 'effective' is a somewhat problematic term, largely due to its subjective nature. However, the aim was to move away from the notion of 'good' feedback as it is felt this does not sufficiently define whether feedback helps a student learn. Any term is going to be difficult due to the difference in value and meanings that both students and

tutors attach to the feedback. We also wanted to know how tutors construct their feedback and their thoughts and views on the feedback process. It was not possible to conduct a statistical review of marks awarded in order to compare these with a detailed content analysis of feedback provided to see if 'effective' feedback results in higher marks in subsequent assignments, with any degree of certainty. There are too many confounding variables, together with the acknowledgement of the very personal way that students interpret their feedback. What we wanted to do is establish how students experience feedback, what they feel about it, and what they do with it.

Seeing the process of providing feedback/guidance as part of a 'learning conversation' helps us to consider the various stages that feedback and guidance can be given to students during their course of study. Working on a modular basis (as all courses within the study adhere to this format of teaching), we established five stages during each module, when the 'learning conversation' can take place. We analysed our findings for each of these stages and these are discussed in detail below. The analysis resulted in identifying 'barriers' to providing effective feedback, thus impeding the learning conversation at each stage. As such, the results are discussed in terms of these barriers. Recommendations are made at the end of each section on how to overcome/avoid these barriers and key recommendations are made at the end of the report.

The stages and barriers are as follows:

Stage		Barrier
1	Preparing for the assessment	Not talking the same language
2	Guidance sought and feedback provided	Being on the wrong track (or not knowing you are on the right one)
3	Feedback provided on assessment	Ineffective feedback
4	Guidance sought on feedback	Inability to seek guidance/clarification
5	Guidance provided on feedback	We think it's all over

BARRIER 1 NOT TALKING THE SAME LANGUAGE

This barrier most often occurs at the 'preparing for the assessment' stage and is particularly relevant at the very beginning of the programme. Several issues arise at this stage in the process that can have an effect on a student's willingness to contact the department and which, particularly when related to the start of the programme, could have a serious, negative, effect on how the student approaches studying and involves him/herself in the learning process. At this stage, clear communication with students is vital. If good and open communication can be established, this will help both the tutor and the student throughout the programme and will open the way for learning conversations and communication between the student and department.

(i) Not talking at all

Very often the student will commence the course without any direct contact with an academic member of staff. He/she is likely to have had contact with at least one administrative member of staff who helps to sort out registration issues, module despatch and access to Blackboard, etc. On the whole, students do not seem to know who their academic staff contact is, or when/why they might have contact with them. Departments approach the issue of a named member of staff or academic tutor differently; some courses had no 'named' tutor other than the course convenor/director, whereas other courses had named tutors for groups of students. However, the common theme is that all courses offer academic support and will provide tutoring/guidance if/when requested. What is concerning is that not all students seem to know this is the case. When students were asked whether they could receive feedback on their progress during the course, over one third stated this was not available. There seems to be either a lack of communication or some misunderstanding concerning the availability of feedback and tutor contact during the course.

Some students would welcome the opportunity to have a relationship with a tutor as they feel this would facilitate learning. The feeling of 'knowing' who they are talking to also helps the student be more proactive about contacting a tutor to discuss aspects of their work.

'The fact that there is no relationship to build on. Compared with non-distant learning there is no opportunity to 'bounce' ideas at all but that speaks to the need for more virtual lectures etc...'

'The fact that it is a long distance learning course makes it impossible for on campus staff/student feedback also the marker of the work does not know the students potential and therefore does not attempt to get the best out of the student'

(ii) Not knowing who you are talking to

Students enrolled in the distance learning programmes included in the research may well have little or no experience of academic study at further or higher education. The Departments of Archaeology and Criminology specify similar entry provisions at undergraduate level: there are no basic academic or professional entry qualifications required at the level of the Certificate in Archaeology or the Foundation Degree in Security and Risk Management. Guidance and help in relation to study skills is made available by these departments to students who may need support in relation to reading and writing for an undergraduate degree. Entry to postgraduate study is usually gained via possession of a first degree in a specific or related discipline, although this is not always necessary. Some of the departments involved in this research are prepared to accept substantial professional experience as the equivalent of first degree. It is possible to draw inferences from the departmental entry requirements and stated target audience of the included programmes as to the academic and professional characteristics of the student cohorts and therefore of the respondents to the survey. They are likely to possess a professional interest the particular field covered by the subject matter of programmes or in a related field; or to be seeking to acquire such an interest; they are likely to be in the early stages of their career or seeking to consolidate their future career prospects; those studying at postgraduate level may occupy senior or managerial positions.

There exists, then, loose groupings of adult learners in terms of academic and professional experience within and across departments and this experience (or lack of it) may be related to preparedness for study and may inform expectations about the 'professionalism' with which the departments deliver feedback and provides them with criteria against which this delivery may be judged (e.g. in relation to timeliness). What sets these adult learners apart from each other is their individual difference in approaches to learning and the 'variations in psychosocial, intellectual, moral and other development continua' Burge (1988:6). According to Burge, individual differences can create a tension between professional skills and performance and academic skills and performance: 'Life experiences may be a resource for learning, but they may also act as hindrances, especially where adults are not confident about themselves as learners' (1988:6).

Due to the often lack of any further/higher educational background, distance learning students can often naturally feel apprehensive about beginning academic study for the first time (or for the first time in many years). Students do not necessarily understand the terminology used in academia and will not necessarily understand the grading structure (particularly perhaps for arts and social science courses). When a tutor has contact with a student it becomes easier to identify with that student and understand their background, working environment, educational abilities, etc. However, as the research has identified, relatively few of our distance learning student have contact with tutors. It can be more difficult to appreciate the background of students when they are unknown and this is where some of the difficulties can arise.

(iii) Talking a different language

Largely due to the issues above, and as has been noted by Holmberg (2003), there should be 'empathy' in course materials and the way they are written/presented. Hillesheim (1998:34) also notes that 'written communication ... can be easy to misunderstand or ignore'. There is a mismatch between student and tutor; tutors are academically qualified and many of them have many years' experience of working in higher education. Much of this experience is likely to have been gained in teaching on campus based courses (with students more likely to have a traditional further/higher education background). As noted, many of our distance learning students do not come from a 'traditional' background and it can sometimes be easy to overlook this when writing distance learning materials and communicating with students.

Terminology has proved to be somewhat confusing or at the least, unclear. Members of staff, mostly, have been informed of and are aware of the terms summative and formative feedback. However, particularly in terms of distance learning, there is not always a clear distinction, as most often, when providing comment on assessed work, the guidance given is intended to be both summative and formative. Tutors can see a clearer distinction when providing feedback on progress during dissertation supervision or on an essay plan, although given the relatively low take up of purely formative feedback, this does not occur very often throughout the modular phase of the programmes. Students were less clear about the terminology. Although definitions of formative

and summative feedback were provided to students, there remained an uneasiness to consider feedback as anything other than comments produced on assessed work. Similar to Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald's (2003) findings, student interviews highlighted that when students contacted tutors concerning essay plans or general queries about the modules or essays questions, students were not likely to consider any responses received as 'feedback' but rather more likely to see this as 'guidance'. Care should be taken over the terminology used and departments should ensure the information they provide clearly outlines what support is available. Departments may want to consider the terminology used in course handbooks, study guides, etc. so that students are aware that guidance/formative feedback is considered part of the learning process.

(iv) Not knowing how/what to study

Due to the lack of previous experience of higher education and a lack of expectations, (most students in our follow-up interviews claimed to have little idea what to expect from their chosen course before they started it) students often do not know how to study. Students, particularly in the digital era, have many opportunities for accessing information relevant to their course, but they do not necessarily know how to discern what they should be accessing and reading, which are the most appropriate or most useful documents, journals, books, websites, etc. Sometimes they do not appreciate the difference between an academic journal and an industry journal/magazine, or indeed, what a journal article is. Students will not necessarily know how many sources to use in preparation for an assignment and they do not always know how to make the best use of materials/resources, make good notes, read or think critically or plan and write assignments to their best ability. This can be disheartening and demoralising to the student. A large proportion of our distance learning students are in employment. Many of these students hold middle to senior level positions and are confident and competent in their working lives. They can experience a clear drop in their confidence levels once they begin academic study. This is not because they are incapable of studying at their chosen level, but often because they do not know how to study effectively. Self-esteem issues feature in the academic literature, with most noting the loss of self-esteem distance learning and mature students can encounter (Hyland, 1998, 2003, Ivanic *et al*, 2000 and Taras, 2003). Brown's (2007) study was one exception in that his students did not note a loss of self-esteem as a result of feedback, although this research did not relate to distance learning students.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Departments could consider clearly identifying an academic staff member to all students. Where there exists the facility to have a specific named tutor, the tutor could email each student to welcome them and introduce him/herself to the student. The tutor should reiterate the support/guidance that is available to the student. Where there is no direct tutoring system in place the course convenor/other staff member could inform the student about the guidance available to students. This information should exist in places other than just in the course handbook. A welcome email to all students informing them of the guidance and support available is a good way to ensure that students know there is academic support available within the department.

Staff members should try to empathise with the student. Language used should be plain and simple at this stage, and staff should appreciate that students may be lacking confidence/self esteem,

which may be likely to have an effect on their willingness to contact staff concerning an academic query.

Departments should try to ensure when updating/writing modules that the language used is appropriate and comprehensible, and that there is a sense of a 'conversation' within any text.

Good study skills resources are produced by Student Development. The importance of this study skills guidance and information needs to be made apparent to students in a way that normalises this guidance, so that students do not feel singled out for poor performance, or lose confidence as a result of this. In terms of information retrieval, etc. students should be informed of the type of resources they should use, and provided with clear instructions how to access these. Assumptions should not be made about any prior knowledge of what to study.

Information should be made available via a number of sources: course handbooks, links to Student Development, Blackboard sites, when registering, and with the module for example, so that the student is clearly informed and cannot miss this advice. Students should not only know what is available, but perhaps more importantly, how it might be of use to them.

Barrier 2 **Being on the wrong track (or not knowing you are on the right one)**

This barrier relates to students progressing through their module and seeking guidance/feedback. Students are expected to seek advice, should they feel they need it during their course of study. Our results found that just three percent of respondents claimed to not want feedback on their progress. However, most students do not request feedback during their progression through the module and our research has identified several reasons why this might be the case.

(i) Asymmetrical relationship

Some students feel that they are in a very unequal relationship with academic members of staff (and in some respects, they probably are). This can result in a reluctance to seek advice/guidance. As previously mentioned, distance learning students in general are working professionals and depending upon their level of study, could be at a middle/senior stage in their careers. Student interviews found that many students had little or no expectations when they started the course, largely because they had no prior experience of higher education. To find themselves in a position of being 'student' and knowing little about the process of studying can lead some students to feel they might be 'bothering' academic staff.

(ii) Absence of a relationship

Some students are not aware that there is a member of staff available should they require advice or guidance. Over one third of respondents stated that feedback was not available during their module. Nine percent of respondents did not feel they could ask for feedback on their progress and whilst this is a relatively small amount, this is not the intention of the departments.

Even when a student is aware they can contact the department, it seems that the lack of a relationship with a named person can impact on the likelihood of the student making contact.

'For me I do not feel empowered or encouraged to seek personal feed back from my tutor'

The lack of dialogue and absence of a relationship between tutor and student can enhance feelings of isolation. Some courses used a discussion board on Blackboard to respond to queries during modules. Students generally found this helpful as they could see all the questions other students had asked and the tutor's responses to these questions. Students used these and took on board the suggestions made to other students.

Students remember the feedback they received that they considered to be really helpful and often mentioned the tutor's name in regard to this. Students often made comments such that they wished they had more opportunity for similar feedback (from that particular tutor). Most students who mentioned dissertation supervision had a very positive experience. This support is somewhat different to the support that the students in the sample usually received throughout their taught modules. A named tutor, ongoing support and, at times, the opportunity for telephone discussion were all seen as very positive aspects of this process. This support is possible for students at any stage of the course, but students either do not realise, or are not aware of this, or they do not feel they can ask. Of course, it has to be acknowledged that students do not always necessarily feel they need such support throughout their modules.

(iii) Poor relationship

In very few cases, the student has had a poor experience of contact. Students can occasionally feel they are belittled, talked down to, or that their concerns are not taken seriously. For example:

'It depends who you ask but one lecturer who I am supposed to ask is patronising and sarcastic'

Again, this can have an impact on whether the student is likely to contact that member of staff, or the department again for further advice/guidance and could have a detrimental effect on their learning, self-esteem and motivation for the course.

(iv) Don't know that guidance is available

Guidance/advice throughout each module is available in all departments. However, it is concerning that not all students appear to know this. When asked whether they received feedback on their performance throughout each module, prior to submitting assessed work, the most popular response (from a list of options of which students could choose more than one) was 'No – feedback on my progress is not available', which elicited a similar level of response from students in each department and amounted to over one third of all students in total (124 students).

'There has been no on-going support or feedback outside of assignments'

'No assessment until end of module so nothing to feedback on'

Some students did not understand the point of providing feedback on progress:

'Nothing is produced that really requires feedback. I don't see what can be said to help with reading and note taking'

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Tutors should aim to ensure that empathetic in language is used in writing course materials, course handbooks and when communicating directly with students. This may help to bridge the gap between student and tutor and lessen the asymmetry of the relationship.

Tutors should strive to establish and maintain a good relationship with the student, as this may result in the student being more likely to seek necessary guidance. If a student feels they 'know' their tutor/academic staff member they seem more likely to make contact. Students need to feel that their 'tutor' understands and appreciates where they are coming from and some of the difficulties they face as part time, distance learning students.

Whilst acknowledging that students cannot necessarily pick and choose who they turn to for advice, students should be able to contact other staff members/tutors, if they do not have a good, productive relationship with their named tutor.

Availability of guidance and advice during the module should be made clear to students, again, in various formats, so that the student is aware that support is available from the department and how this might be of benefit to the student. Students should be made aware that feedback does not just relate to comments made on assessed work.

Assignment preparation stage: feedback provided during the module

Overwhelmingly, when students request guidance during the module, they find the feedback helpful, with only six respondents stating they did not find it helpful. 64 percent of students want feedback on their progress and 26 percent are unsure. However, where a student has requested feedback/guidance during the module, the research identified two main reasons why effective feedback is not always given:

(i) Feedback not always received in time

Of the 159 students who answered this question, 77 stated that feedback was always received in time. Of some concern was the finding that 68 students claimed it was only 'sometimes' received in time and fourteen claimed it was never received in time to be of use for the assignment in question. Assuming that students request guidance and feedback in order for it to help with their assignment, this result needs to improve. In some cases, this may be because the request for the guidance was made later on in the module leaving little time to respond and provide feedback in sufficient time for the student to make use of this. In some cases the feedback could have been sufficiently detailed that the student could not fully use this before the assignment deadline. However, it is likely that some responses simply took too long.

(ii) The guidance sought is unclear/asking the wrong questions

Students need to be clear on what can be done in terms of giving feedback. Some students state that the response is sometimes not sufficiently specific. This could be due a number of reasons. For example, if responding on a Blackboard discussion board, the tutor may make the feedback less specific so as to be of use to other students reading the board. Students may assume there is always a 'model answer' and so may be expecting a very specific response and then get disappointed when this is not received. Tutors may receive a very short bullet point essay plan, which does nothing to highlight the types of arguments proposed, for example, leaving it difficult to provide useful comment. On occasion, it is not clear what the student is actually asking, which can account for vague or potentially unhelpful feedback. However, it may also be the case that the tutor believes they have given clear feedback but the student does not find this useful/helpful. Time issues or the tutor wanting the student to put more effort in, rather than simply being 'told the answer' may also have an effect. This has highlighted the potential mismatch between student and tutor expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Timely responses to students are important. When a student requests 'formative' feedback, tutors should ensure that, wherever possible, feedback is provided within a few days. Most students do not expect an instant response (although they are very pleased when they receive one) but ideally they should not have to wait more than three days for this. Students should be informed that

feedback/guidance is not instant and that they should allow time for the tutor to deal with their enquiry. It is not desirable for students to request feedback one or two days before a deadline, for example and expect a response in time, and students should be informed of this in advance. Communicating clear guidelines on this is important as this helps to manage expectations.

Students need to be clear on what can be done in terms of giving feedback. If a department is happy to review and comment on essay plans, students should be informed what their essay plan should contain, for example. Students should be informed to make their requests as clear as possible if they have specific queries. Again, this information can be provided to student in a variety of formats, and a number of times throughout the course. Students (especially in this research) need to be clear that there is no model answer, but rather a variety of ways that the assignment could be addressed.

Assessment submitted: feedback provided

Students are generally pleased with the feedback they receive on their assignments, although this does vary between departments. Overall, 74 percent of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the feedback they received and 22 percent were either not very, or not at all satisfied. All students within the research departments receive a mark and some form of written comments. Some courses also provide tick boxes, or the return the annotated essay to the student.

The research has provided some useful findings on what does not constitute effective feedback on assignments:

(i) Negativity

Students invest a lot of time and effort in their assignments. As we have already acknowledged, distance learning students are mostly all in employment and spend a lot of their own time studying. Some students felt the feedback provided on their assessed work was particularly negative and that on occasion, the tone was inappropriate. This relates to both good and poorer pieces of work, such that a piece of work scoring relatively highly was deemed to be overly critical in tone, for example.

Feedback that is overly critical will not necessarily help a student who has not performed as well as might have been expected. Nor will it necessarily provide the correct encouragement to a student with little confidence in his/her abilities. Students studying at a distance can at times lose motivation and self-esteem, and excessive negativity in feedback could contribute to this. Some student quotations are given below to support this, in response to being questioned about the worst aspect of the feedback that they receive:

'As I'm still learning, negative comments'

'The hammering'

'Demoralisation and the generic feel of "some" of the feedback'

'Disheartening to receive comment that did not reflect accurately the amount of effort and hard work put into the assignment'

'Negative comments on something that I have worked hard at'

'Receiving bad feedback on areas that I spent a lot of time on thinking I had done well'

'Extremely negative comments when it is a new subject'

'Occasionally I have thought the comments narrow-minded or just wrong'

'Negative criticism without assistance on how better to interpret the assignment together with no suggestions on what could have been included/excluded to improve a line of thought/evidence'

'Feed back that tells me nothing but discourages me'

'Negative comments can simply come at the 'wrong' time, especially just before a new assignment deadline when I am feeling under pressure'

'Focussing on the missing word rather than the content – I was called lazy which I rather resented given the effort I had put in'

'Generally the comments seem more negative than the mark would imply - a decent mark should have a least some praise in the feedback'

'I received terrible marks on my first assignment and pretty low marks on the second. It wasn't so much the low marking; it was the condescending "obviously..." comments. I felt if it was so obvious, then I would have obviously put it in the paper.'

(ii) Lack of specificity

Results from the student questionnaire and interviews showed that students do not find general comments particularly helpful, but instead require specific examples related to the feedback so that they can see exactly to what the tutor is referring. Students commented on feedback concerning English, grammar, referencing, analytical skills (or lack of) as examples of where they need more detail. Similar to what the literature suggests, tutors claim to do this in the feedback they produce. Tutors clearly acknowledged the need for specific examples to be given to student. However, it appears from the students' point of view, that this is not necessarily the case. Again, detailed below are some quotations from students in this regard:

'Apart from the few specific comments the rest just seemed to be general information from the course handbook'

'Because I do not get the assignment back it is not easy to determine the key points made by the marker'

'Comments are not linked to specifics within the essay'

'Does not inform how well I would present a critical analysis'

'The feedback that does not suggest a better alternative approach to the one already used'

'It contains information which would have been useful BEFORE answering the assignment'

'It lacks credibility and is not as useful as it might be because it is given in isolation from the assessed essay. It is impossible to compare certain aspects of the critique to the essay as it comes in the form of generalisations eg. "you should improve on your grammar" but no reference is made to specific grammatical errors to what the correction should be.'

'No corrected work and suggestions on a returned corrected essay. Is it possible to have our work corrected and sent back to us?'

'Too limited and too much assumption on previous education processes'

(iii) Inconsistency

Students felt there was a lot of inconsistency in their feedback. This was the most often mentioned problem and perceived barrier to effective feedback. Feedback comments should reflect the mark awarded. Students became confused if they achieved a good score but the feedback suggests there was much more to be done. Conversely, if they achieved a low mark, but the comments were generally positive, this was not found to be helpful.

The main issue concerning inconsistency was perceived inconsistency across assignments. Students generally understood that their work is likely to be marked by different tutors (some students would prefer one tutor to mark all of their work, others would not). The main type of issue here was when a student received a comment on a later assignment, concerning referencing, for example, when the student felt that he/she had referenced the same in all previous assignments, but that this had not been mentioned before. Students also noted that on some occasions, certain issues were addressed, but not at other times. This left some with the impression that individual tutors had certain 'bugbears' that they were picking out, but this was resulting in mixed messages for the student. The following quotations are examples from students across all departments that express their irritation:

'Comments that do not reflect the grade given'

'Different markers clearly liking different things'

'Different tutors provide different quantities of feedback, and sometimes disagree on what is important'

'Each essay has been marked by a different person'

'I have some absolutely hilarious examples of feedback that stipulate I should do something in one way (such as referencing) then when I change the method for the next essay the marker says it should be how it was before.'

'I have, once only, received contradictory comments that made me wonder if the marker had properly read the full extent of the question. It was not a critical point so did not challenge it...but it made me wonder a bit'

'Short and in most cases contradicts either themselves or what I understood the course material was or contradicts other tutors and their requirements. I am left in the dark'

'Some contradictions, between different feedback i.e. Some highlight referencing problems but when I make the same mistake in the following essay it is not mentioned. This in turn leads me to think that other areas are perhaps overlooked in some feedback forms'

'Some of the markers on my course have very different expectations, particularly with regard to the structure of the assignment and the level of analysis expected'

'When it contradicts previous feedback. For example no comments were made about my referencing until the last two assignments of the course. Yet I had used the same referencing format for all my assignments'

From a tutors' perspective, several mentioned not wanting to point out all the issues requiring future attention, as this could be felt to be either demoralising or there would too many points for the student to focus on. This may explain why some tutors choose not to remark on issues that they may not view as important as certain others. As noted, some of the literature also suggests focusing on just a few main points, rather than going through every point that requires attention (Webb, 2007, cited in Stothart, 2007). However, when reading feedback, students can sometimes become overly concerned about a comment that they feel has been inconsistent to the detriment of focusing on comments that tutors might consider to be more important issues. It is important to make clear to the student the main points to focus on, but to also ensure consistency in the comments.

(iii) Delay

The student survey asked whether the feedback students receive on their assignments is received in time for it to be useful for their next assignment, and unfortunately, many students feel that they do not always receive this in time.

Departments varied in the timescales they aimed to return feedback from between 3-4 weeks up to 10 weeks. Most students do receive their feedback within the timeframe set by the department, although students from some departments showed higher proportions receiving feedback after 10 weeks. Occasionally, some assignments fall through the net, with some students claiming it has taken several months for them to receive feedback. What is arguably more important than how

long the feedback takes to return to students is whether this feedback is received in time to be useful for the next assignment. Overall, 37 percent of respondents felt that the feedback was always received in time to be useful, 51 percent felt that it was sometimes received in time and 12 percent claimed it was never received in time. There are some clear reasons why feedback is not received in time; for example, if a student has received an extension for an assignment and has submitted later than the deadline. However, when an assignment is submitted by the deadline, departments should aim to return feedback within the stated timeframe. Where there is only a short space between submission dates, particular effort needs to be made to ensure that feedback is produced before the next assignment is due.

In order for feedback to be of use to the student, it should be received in time for them to be able to use it for their next assignment. Much published literature suggests that the most useful feedback is virtually instantaneous (or at least within a few days). However, our research does not completely concur with this. The student interviews showed that on the whole, students understood why feedback took several weeks to produce and in general, did not seem to mind this; as long as it was received a few weeks before their next assignment was due. If feedback was received within the timeframes specified by the departments; this was seen as acceptable.

(iv) Lack of relationship

Several tutors mentioned either having or the lack of, a relationship with a student. Tutors see the name on the assignment and will often know if they have marked the student's work on previous occasions. Even where the tutor him/herself has not marked previous work, many claimed to go back and review previous feedback for that student, on occasion. This helps the tutor consider whether a student has been informed about an area of their work before – and if they have, they can then remark on this in the feedback and try to establish whether the student has understood the feedback (if the same 'mistake' has occurred again).

Some tutors felt that it would be preferable for one tutor to oversee a particular group of students. In this way, the tutor would get a better understanding of the student's progress throughout the course and try to build a relationship, which, as noted, can very often be lacking in distance learning education. One tutor noted:

I think that the same marker should mark the same students' work as they progress through the course, so there's a sense of ownership of progression then and also there's a sense of community ... and DL students feel distant at the best of times

Tutors find it rewarding to see that some students do implement some of the suggestions made in previous feedback. One tutor remarked that it is enjoyable when assessing a student's work checking back to what they have done earlier and thinking:

'gosh, they've actually taken it on board. And you can see progression ... that's really rewarding'.

The marking process can take some considerable time, and if the tutors are not able to see any progression, they are often left wondering whether their time spent on marking has been worth it (which concurs with Hyland, 2001 and Glover and Brown, 2006). This is perhaps especially pertinent given previous research which suggests that students do not read or pay close attention to their feedback. We have not found this to be the case in this research. Tutors spend a lot of time and effort on marking assignments and providing feedback. Where they can see that a student has taken the feedback on board, it reinforces their belief in the process and results in tutors feeling that their time has been well spent. However, it can be demoralising for tutors when they do not get to see the same students' work again. They can be left wondering whether the student has understood, appreciated, taken on board, or even read, their feedback and it leads them to question the usefulness of the process. As a result, tutors are not entirely confident about the value of feedback. They question whether providing more feedback would produce a benefit commensurate with the time and effort put in. Some examples of their comments are below:

'I know sometimes they're just looking at the mark and that's it and not actually taking any notice'

'I definitely think there's a cut off point after which, giving more students don't take it in'

'Well, anecdotally the impression I've often got, probably from overseas students more ... is that they look at the mark and they may look at the final comments but don't really pay attention to the detail that they get in the other feedback ... which makes you think that the feedback simply isn't given the regard that we would like it to be ... the expectations or the ambitions that we would like the students to have aren't necessarily the ones that the students have themselves'

'Well comparing it to other universities, I think it's more comprehensive and it's certainly lengthier, I'm just not sure it's any more valuable. I think that the length, the important features can get lost in the detail sometimes. So providing more is not necessarily providing better'

Tutors are often aware that students' marks do not necessarily move in an upward trajectory throughout the course. Students could take feedback on board, but their marks may not necessarily improve, or due to other variables, a mark might even be lower. Tutors stated that they have little idea as to whether attention is paid to feedback. Partly because they do not necessarily get to see the student progress and partly because when they do see the student's subsequent work or marks, they do not appear to have significantly improved, as the following quotations demonstrate:

'You don't get any sense of how well this is being viewed and whether it means anything'

'We have a thing ... which says, we will check that you've, if we've asked them to do something, particularly formulate things like bibliographies and referencing ... we will check that you will have done this right the next time and I don't know if they take that seriously, sometimes it looks like perhaps they don't'

'most students find their level quite early and tend to stay on it. You don't get many, to my recollection ... that start in the 40s and 50s and gradually develop and start doing 60s and 70s ...that leads me to think that for the most part, students ... may take something, they may get some benefit from it, but in terms of outcomes, in terms of their performance, I'm not sure the feedback is as crucial as it's made out'

'I would like to think that mature students have a different view of their performance and getting feedback and using that but I don't necessarily think that that's true either because ... when you look at student marks, students' mark profiles don't start somewhere low and move up and move on, which one might assume if they were taking notice of every feedback ... They stay at a level throughout the course'

This might suggest that the feedback provided simply is not appropriate. However, when tutors were asked what they felt was the purpose of feedback, and how they construct their feedback, all respondents stressed the formative nature of the feedback on provided on assignments, and all felt that an important element of feedback is in highlighting to students the strengths and weaknesses in the assignment and, more importantly, how to redress and improve these for future submissions so that a student moves on from 'from A to B'.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Feedback has to be constructive. It should highlight areas for improvement and incorrect aspects of the assignment. However, tutors should aim to write in a style and manner that is not overly critical, and ensure that the feedback does provide some praise for the positive aspects of the assignment.

When writing feedback, tutors should always try to give, or at least refer to, examples in the work so that the student is clear about exactly where they have gone wrong and/or where (and how) they need to improve. Further, departments may want to consider marking on the assignments itself and returning to the student, alongside the feedback comments. Students who received their assignments back annotated valued this as it helped to show the student exactly where/what the tutor was referring to.

Tutors need to try and be as consistent as possible with all assignments, both in terms of the marks and comments 'matching up' but also in terms of regularly addressing similar issues. This is perhaps easier said than done, given that it is the main point of complaint in this research. Regular training and feedback should be provided to tutors so that they are all aware of this issue. Departments could consider adopting a 'marker's checklist' form to assist tutors and to ensure that they are at least always covering certain points, but that they can add further content and context specific comments as well. This somewhat goes against suggestions that feedback should be tailored to individual students (as opposed to individual pieces of work). However, as already noted, it is unlikely, in a distance learning context, that such individual feedback could ever be provided.

Departments should not underestimate the amount of time it takes to process and mark distance learning assignments. If they can provide a realistic timeframe and meet it, there is little problem for students (as long as this is received in time to be useful for the next assignment). This timeframe needs to be clearly communicated to students, and students should be encouraged to contact the department if they have not received their feedback by such a time. If it is not possible or not intended that students should receive feedback to help with the next assignment, this should be communicated to students. If this is the case, arrangements could be put in place for a more systematic use of formative feedback on these occasions.

Departments might reconsider their marking procedures and the provision of feedback. They may want to consider the potential benefits of tutors marking the same group of students' work throughout.

BARRIER 4 INABILITY TO OBTAIN GUIDANCE/CLARIFICATION

As part of the learning process and 'conversation', some students are likely to want to discuss their feedback with a tutor, or clarify, query or argue certain points raised therein. In general, students are not widely encouraged at this stage to contact members of staff in the departments to do so. This leaves some students at a loss, as they may not always fully understand their feedback, nor perhaps agree with it, but feel they have no option to discuss this, as the following quotations suggest:

'Not being able to talk and ask questions about certain aspects of the remarks. But that is my responsibility to contact my tutor'

'That it is not so easy to talk to someone about it'

'No opportunity to have verbal or email interaction prior to submission of assignment to better understand what the examiner is seeking - and same comment applies after the result is received back'

'Not being able to discuss what seem contentious comments'

'That it's one-way, I can't comment back on the comment to explain why I have done certain things the way I chose to'

'When you don't necessarily agree with a comment made, there is no avenue open for discussion with the tutor'

At the moment this mainly relates to the feedback received on assessed work as few students seek feedback on work before an assignment is due. However, where a student receives formative feedback on work prior to submitting, as this is seen as more informal, they are more likely to clarify a point. It could be suggested that students are more likely at this stage to do so because it will help

them in writing their assignment, whereas some students will see little point in doing so after the mark has been awarded.

All students are able to contact a member of staff to discuss their feedback, if they wish, so it is surprising to note that many do not know this to be the case (there is some variance amongst departments). It is likely that this information simply is not communicated clearly to students. For those who said they could not discuss their feedback with a member of staff, it was a mixture of not knowing they could do so, or not feeling able to, either because of the medium; Blackboard being 'too impersonal and open' or because overseas students find it difficult to contact staff, for example. Some students have had a negative experience in this respect.

As before, one issue mentioned by both students and tutors is the lack of relationship between student and tutor. From the student perspective, this was made apparent in both the student questionnaire and the follow-up interviews. When asked, in the questionnaire, what is the worst aspect of feedback, several students made comments relating to lack of dialogue and contact with the tutor. These mainly related to students not knowing who had marked their work and thus not knowing who to contact to discuss the comments. Students may need to clarify points made in the feedback, especially perhaps when the comments are not clear or the student finds them incorrect or contradictory, as the following quotations demonstrate:

'I am uncertain if I can email the evaluator to discuss the comments and my work'

'Lack of personal contact with the person making the assessment'

'Lack of support when there are problems'

'My assessor is a faceless name to me. I have no idea who it is'

'Not being able to talk and ask questions about certain aspects of the remarks. But that is my responsibility to contact my tutor'

'Not knowing who is commenting on your work'

'That it is not so easy to talk to someone about it'

'When you don't necessarily agree with a comment made, there is no avenue open for discussion with the tutor'

'That it's one-way, I can't comment back on the comment to explain why I have done certain things the way I chose to'

This is of course understandable, but it can impede student learning if students do not feel able, know they can, or know who to contact to get the necessarily clarification in order to understand the comments made.

Some students, for a variety of reasons (cultural, time zone, and/or self-esteem issues, for example), do not feel able to ask for feedback. This only applies to a small percentage of the overall respondents to the survey (nine percent), but this is something that we should aim to avoid if possible.

Some of the dialogue at this stage can be reasonably limited. Students can clarify feedback if there is a point they do not understand, or they can query some feedback if they feel it is incorrect. However, students cannot appeal against a mark awarded (unless they feel there has been a procedural irregularity). In these cases it can also sometimes be difficult to have a dialogue with a student when he/she does not accept feedback provided (even though this has academic agreement).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Departments need to understand the feedback process as a two-way process and as part of the learning conversation and thus appreciate the students' 'need' for dialogue. Clear information should be provided to students regarding who to contact and staff should aim to empathise with the student and help clarify and explain points of contention/confusion. In so doing, departments should communicate with the student about what they can refer to the tutor, with regards to the feedback. Archaeology and Ancient History highlights good practice here with the inclusion of a sheet sent with the feedback informing the student what to do next. Departments could consider adopting a similar form to accompany their feedback.

As well as improving communication with the student, departments could consider where occasions may exist for giving students an opportunity to discuss their feedback. For example, Law demonstrates good practice in providing students attending study schools the opportunity to meet with a tutor to discuss their work.

Departments need to acknowledge that some students may want assistance but do not feel able to ask for it. Some of the above barriers may have had an effect (or compound effect) on the student at this stage. Departments should continue to make clear that all students are entitled to feedback/guidance if they want this, and mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that students know this, and know who to contact.

At this stage, feedback or guidance has been provided for students who have requested it on the feedback received on their assessed work. Many tutors feel that at this stage, it should all be over now. It can sometimes be difficult, not to mention timely, to go back over assessed work and feedback and re-state the feedback provided. However, we need to recognise students' need for dialogue as part of the learning process and their need for 'comeback' to either query the feedback, or even perhaps to provide some justification for why they did what they did, so that they respond to some of the issues raised in the feedback. The process of giving feedback on assessed work is usually one-way. However, it is completely understandable that the student may want to have a discussion about some of the comments made. Due to the sometimes very small numbers of members of staff working on distance learning programmes, there can be a tendency to not want to encourage more contact with students as this will create more work than tutors can realistically cope with.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

When advice on the feedback is requested, tutors should again ensure that they respond to this in a timely manner and deal with any queries sensitively. Students sometimes simply want to put their point of view across and tutors should not always think a student is coming back to complain or appeal.

Once the above measures are adopted and if this results in an increased amount of contact with an increased amount of students, departments should ensure procedures are put in place to accommodate this additional workload.

SUMMARY

Distance learning is a major component of the University's business. One the whole, distance learning students are professional and highly motivated (certainly at least when they begin their studies). It is of considerable importance that we ensure we are providing a suitable learning and teaching environment for them. Whilst students are generally satisfied with the feedback they receive on their assessed work, there are some problems concerning the content, style and delivery of this feedback. Students do not tend to consider any other form of guidance as feedback and terminology is important here. Many students do not know that guidance/feedback is available to them throughout their programme and this was perhaps the most surprising finding from the research. Staff working on distance learning courses are hard working and conscientious when it comes to marking assignments and providing feedback and advice to students. However, there is a general feeling of a lack of resources for time being afforded at the individual level to students. This is coupled with a lack of knowledge about student progress for many involved with distance learning, due to the way that courses are managed.

We have not sought to completely overhaul working practices, but we have identified areas within the process where there is the potential for barriers to effective feedback to arise. The above recommendations are suggestions of ways to avoid these. Key recommendations follow that we feel encompass these.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The presentation of information should be top-loaded so that expectations are clearly understood and the potential for guidance and feedback is clearly communicated to students from the very beginning of the programme, through a variety of mediums
- Students should be informed what the department views as the purpose of feedback and students should be instructed on the ways in which they can use their feedback
- Course materials should be reviewed for clarity and coherence. Departments should try to ensure that course materials and communication with students are constructed with 'empathy' in mind
- Feedback/guidance needs to be received in time for it to be useful
- Ensure consistency in feedback, both in terms of the mark matching the tone of the comments, and consistency across modules
- Establish a relationship between academic members of staff and students, which should provide positive benefits to both
- Remember that the process is ongoing throughout the whole course of studies

7. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

Work has already begun in the Department of Criminology to put some of the recommendations into practice:

Since the April 2009 Study School we have been offering returning students attending the study schools the opportunity for an individual consultation with an academic member of staff to discuss their progress on the course. This has proved very popular amongst students and gives tutors the opportunity to meet with students face to face, which seems to particularly benefit students encountering problems with their work.

The markers' training manual has been revised to incorporate some of the recommendations made in this report. A markers' training day was held in June 2009 for existing and new external markers, which emphasised the findings of the research and the changes in feedback practices.

A thorough revision of course handbooks has been undertaken. Sections highlighting the student support available have been emphasised in line with the recommendations made above.

As modules are updated, these are also revised in line with recommendations made above.

A trial of using Blackboard as a regular formative feedback facility is being undertaken, commencing in September 2009 and participation of this will be monitored.

8. DISSEMINATION

An article for academic published is currently being written, to be submitted within the next month.

The project directors plan to present a paper at an appropriate distance learning conference.

Departments that took part in the research will receive their Departmental level student data so that they may review this in line with the above.

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