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## Aligning assessment, feedback and action planning for international students

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**Abstract:** *What language should feature in assessment criteria for international students? How do students reflect on assessment feedback to allow the creation of effective action plans for future learning? Have universities adjusted their assessment methods sufficiently to match the increased demand for studying abroad? What can art and design contribute to these issues? These are some of the questions this paper seeks to address by reporting on recent pedagogic research at the School of the Arts, Loughborough University, in the United Kingdom. Language use is at the heart of this, and yet, it has been overlooked as an essential tool that links assessment, feedback, and action planning for international students. The paper reveals existing and new data that builds on research since 2009, aimed at improving students' assessment literacy.*

**Keywords:** *Assessment criteria, Feedback, Action planning, Internationalisation.*

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## Introduction

This paper reports on two dimensions of pedagogic research in art and design assessment practice at a research-led university in the United Kingdom. First, we consider recent pedagogic research that extends the use of keyword assessment strategies in the UK to collaborative work in Holland. Second, the paper reports on a project to help students reflect on their assessment feedback through action planning. These issues are contextualised against the historical and recent understanding of internationalisation.

Early findings suggest that certain keywords are more easily located than others on a mark scale from 0-100%, whereas some are ambiguous to students who know English as a second language. This responds in part to recent concerns about how criteria is used to judge work in fields that are immersed in art and design higher education assessment practices, such as graphic design (van der Waarde 2009: 11). Regarding students' ability to reflect on feedback, problems are identified relating to difficulties associated with undertaking pedagogic research with students that encourage them to be active rather than passive in their response to feedback. This will be contextualised as part of a wider student centred assessment, feedback and action planning cycle.

I report on-going pedagogic research into aspects of the undergraduate assessment cycle, such as the link between reflection and action-planning which is little understood by students (Parkin *et al*, 2012: 969) who find difficulty learning from feedback (Orsmond *et al*, 2013: 241). The research is contextualised against a 're-internationalisation' agenda that has emerged since the early 1990s in the United Kingdom, driven by economic growth. The extension of existing research tests previously held assumptions about keyword use in the application of assessment criteria with an international audience. New data reported here raises important questions about how to relate verbal descriptors to class and grade indicators in assessment practice. Furthermore, different approaches to assessment level indicators at a national and international level are noted to highlight the variation between Universities. This is supplemented by the design of tools that intend to encourage students to reflect on assessment feedback and develop a response to it in the form of an action plan. Internationalisation is also outlined with the intention to encourage an inclusive approach to assessment processes that focuses on what students do rather than what teachers do or what students are. The paper begins with by reviewing recent work on developing and testing a keyword strategy for assessment criteria that supports written criteria statements to help guide tutors and tutees towards a collective understanding about levels of achievement. This has been undertaken in the UK and The Netherlands, bringing an international dimension to what began as an internal process to review assessment criteria. The discussion moves on by reporting on new work about student reflection on feedback through action planning tools.

This is contextualised against the development of internationalisation, emphasising the need for language use to be more carefully considered and explained as an enabler to learning for international students.

### INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It seems obvious to state that Internationalisation and Higher Education have been directly linked through the development of research between scholars throughout the history of universities. However, more recently the alignment of academic standards

for research and teaching is cited as an increasingly important factor (IMHE 1999, p. 19) as universities see internationalisation as 'the concept and the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions' through 'quality assessment and assurance' matters (IMHE 1999, p. 3). 'Globalisation' is therefore an influential factor in the present-day understanding of internationalisation, the incentives being 'commercial advantage, knowledge and language acquisition, enhancing the curriculum with international content, and many others' (Altbach & Knight, 2007: 290).

Internationalisation in this present-day sense is said to have been a priority in Europe since the early 1990s and the contrast between the historical and contemporary emphasis leads to what has been called 're-internationalisation' (Teichler, 2004: 6–9). That said, a distinction has also been made regarding 'cooperative internationalisation' or the 'commercial internationalisation' (Beelen and de Wit, 2012: 1) acknowledging increased competition.

Over the previous two decades, the economic dimension to the latter has become more vivid in countries such as the UK because funding for university education has shifted from the public to private sector through gradual increases in tuition fees compensating a stagnation and more recent reduction of government funding. A consequence of this has been to seek out more international students willing to pay tuition fees higher than has been typical for UK based students of the past. With this change has come the need to reflect on how curriculum is suited to the overseas students. This must also include assessment and feedback processes because these differ significantly between institutions in the UK and beyond. Despite the reinterpretation of internationalisation in the guise of economic development over a period of two decades, little appears to have been published on issues that link internationalisation to assessment criteria and art and design.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that attempts to internationalise the curriculum are resisted and further complicated by suggestions that mythologised 'bohemian, liberal and open minded' academics who teach art and design react with 'reticence and resistance' to the idea of internationalisation (Barham, 2011). It is therefore clear to see how international issues may be overlooked in the development of assessment criteria, providing written feedback, and encouraging students to reflect on their feedback and instigate actions plans.

An assessment process that has language at the core must therefore consider not only the fluency and transference of language between learning outcomes, assessment methods, assessment criteria, and written feedback, but also action planning, and the in/ability of international students to interpret meaning associated with important words and phrases at the core of assessment practice. If this is problematic, supporting international students requires an inclusive approach to 'cross-cultural teaching' with a focus on 'what students do', over 'what teachers do' and 'what students are'. This is what Biggs describes as 'teaching as educating' rather than 'teaching as accommodation' or 'teaching as assimilation' in ways that avoid stereotypes (2003, pp. 120–139).

## **Testing keywords internationally for assessment**

Pass and fail is a rudimentary way to determine the outcome of assessment. More specific is to establish a class or grade that indicates a level of achievement that may also support verbal descriptors. Nomenclature such as 'good', 'very good', 'excellent'

and ‘outstanding’ distinguish ‘levels of competence’ (Davies 2012, p. 2) and an extended correlation between class, verbal descriptor and literal grade establishes the relationship between different ways of indicating achievement levels to students. One interpretation of that number, letter and word based marking systems, is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparison of class, verbal description & literal grade indicator.  
Source: Brown 1997, p. 75

<b>Class</b>	<b>Verbal description</b>	<b>Literal Grade</b>
1	excellent	A+
		A
2:1	very good	A–
		B+
2:2	good	B
		B–
		C+
3	moderate	C
		C–
P	marginal pass	D+
		D
		D–
F	fail	E

Recently at Loughborough University School of the Arts this has been supplemented by adding to the list verbal descriptions, or keywords, to align with ten equal percentage divisions between 0–100%. This has been done to encourage more consistency between marking tutors (Harland and Sawdon 2011) in their use of language when providing feedback to students. For example, two students who receive the same percentage grade should also expect a similar verbal indicator, but this has not always been the case. This introduced additional words to differentiate further the bands typically aligned with the first class (70% plus) and fail (below 40%) bracket typically used in UK assessment matrices, after surveying assessment criteria from nine universities. See Table 2. The words were sourced to support the writing and presentation in student handbooks of guidance for the application of assessment criteria across four assessment criteria headings commonly used in the UK: knowledge and understanding, subject-specific cognitive skills, subject-specific practical skills, and key/transferable skills. A working group of academic staff agreed these verbal descriptors based on the usefulness for marking both written (e.g. essay) and practical (e.g. artefact) outputs by students. As part of the process, consultation with staff and students took place in the form of a small focus group and the findings supported the ordering of word recommendations against a hierarchy of numerical grading as seen below.

**Table 2.** A hierarchy of key terms representing ten percent divisions.

Source: Harland and Sawdon 2012

90–100	Outstanding
80–89	Excellent
70–79	Rigorous
60–69	Very Good
50–59	Good
40–49	Satisfactory
30–39	Marginal
20–29	Insubstantial
10–19	Insufficient
0–9	Deficient

These were adopted after reviewing research data established specifically for discussion and debate regarding how other institutions typically place words to match a percentage grade indicator. The data contained familiar and specific meaning words (e.g. excellent) and those more casual and unfamiliar in an academic context (e.g. sound). See Table 3.

**Table 3.** Assessment criteria keyword analysis from nine higher education establishments.  
Source: Harland and Sawdon 2012, p. 74

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
90-100	Extensive In-depth Coherent Detailed Theoretical Intellectual	Extensive Deep Excellent Inventive Ambitious Exceptional Highly flexible	Outstandingly high quality Originality	A Outstanding High quality Originality Excellent technical competence & Innovation	Outstanding Original Complex Rigorous New insights Publishable Extensive Effective	Significant Original Transcend Transform	Outstanding Exceptionally high standard Trial defects	Unfamiliar conceptual territories Unified Dissemination Technical/craft Persuasive Compelling Responsibility Well informed Wide ranging	High order Appropriate Developed capacity Very high standard
80-89	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Excellent Very minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Rigorous High quality
70-79	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Originality
60-69	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Above average Synthesis Sound
50-59	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Average Clear
40-49	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Limited Adequate
30-39	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Inadequate Very limited Poor
20-29	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Poor judgement Very limited Ineffective
10-19	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	No awareness
0-9	Comprehensive Coherent Wide ranging Specialist techniques Systematic Thorough In-depth Advanced Critical Creative	Sound Very good High level Inventive Strong Quite flexible	Exceptional Distinguished Authoritative Interdisciplinary Critical, Skilled Very good insight Good quality Sound Ordering Appropriate Insight	A Excellent Exceptional Distinguished Very good quality	Confident Appropriate Organised Structured	Challenging Exceptional Evaluative	Very good Few minor defects	Accurate Extensive Risk taking Selective Organised Reflective Professional	Incomplete Fragmentary Zero response

A focus group with students and staff at Loughborough University contributed to establishing the keyword ranking for the ten levels of achievement. Participants were presented with randomly assembled words selected by the academic working group, and asked to organise these in rank order from 1 (low) to 10 (high). See Figure 1. The outcome of the exercise, whilst with a small number of participants, provided quick

feedback to the working group with their established order. This qualitative scaling of achievement has since been published in student handbooks as part of a revised set of assessment criteria statements. For further reading, a detailed discussion has been reported in the journal *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education* (Harland and Sawdon 2011).



**Figure 1.** Random keywords for assessment ranking. Source: Harland and Sawdon 2012, p. 79

The ten key terms have since been further tested approximately 45 undergraduate and postgraduate students and five academic staff at the St Joost Academy of Art in Breda, The Netherlands, during a workshop session in February 2012. A similar approach was taken as the focus group exercise in the UK, but with a smaller sample size. The results from the Dutch event presented a variable data set from an audience who did not speak English as their first language, and some of whom were from outside The Netherlands (the exact breakdown is not known but it is assumed the majority were Dutch).

Close inspection of the St Joost results revealed tolerance levels required for keywords beyond the limited nomenclature of excellent, very good, good, moderate, marginal, pass, and fail mentioned earlier, for an international audience is likely to be complex. This difficulty is further emphasised by anecdotal feedback during the exercise at St Joost, when some students revealed that certain words do not migrate that well between assessment cultures. For example, one Russian student confessed that words such as 'outstanding' may be difficult for Russian speakers as it suggests the work being assessed stood physically (not intellectually) apart from the rest of the



assignments, and therefore may not be assessed. Also, Dutch academics debated if the idea of 'rigorous' had a Dutch equivalent and it seemed there was not a direct translation. This clearly suggests potential problems associated with a keyword approach to assessment criteria for international staff and students.

As previously mentioned, the same exercise was undertaken at a workshop at the GLAD 2012 Conference at Kingston University, in the UK, but to a smaller audience. Eleven academic staff produced data, shown also in Table 1, revealing variation on the relative position of keywords. Most were ranked within 10% of the predetermined position, some occasionally up to 20%. The most consistently misplaced examples were 'insubstantial' and 'insufficient', the former being matched on only 4 from 11 responses.

Reading the data generated by staff and students at St Joost Academy of Art reveals that building a hierarchy of words in an international context with less than a 20% tolerance in the alignment with a predetermined grade band is difficult. Occasionally there was as much as 70% difference in the hierarchical placement of words within the set. In fact, the degree of accuracy is very low regarding the ability to rank words and match them to the recommendations made by the Loughborough working group. A lack of fluency in English is the probable explanation for this, as one can assume some words (e.g. excellent) are generally understood by most with a basic understanding of English. The reliability of 'blind' ranking keywords is shown in Table 4, and the degree of accuracy varies between the least reliable score of 30% for the word 'rigorous' and the most reliable score of 74% for the word 'satisfactory'. The reliability for matching keywords to a predetermined rank casts doubt on the relationship between keywords and the achievement levels they represent, especially for international students who will have a limited initial understanding about the application of assessment criteria.

**Table 4.** Reliability of 'blind' ranking of keywords to a predetermined order.

10	Outstanding	60%
9	Excellent	58%
8	Rigorous	30%
7	Very good	40%
6	Good	62%
5	Satisfactory	74%
4	Marginal	64%
3	Insubstantial	46%
2	Insufficient	58%
1	Deficient	62%

The data samples generated at St Joost and GLAD 2012 are relatively small samples and lack reliability to generalise in more meaningful ways. However, the data provided the kind of quick feedback often associated with focus group research, and quick responses to aide the further development of the research. The inherent value of the data suggests that adopting a keyword strategy may have significant implications for an international audience because of cultural issues relating to language and understanding, and the subsequent development of their knowledge. The implication for this becomes more significant if staff replicate keywords of this kind in their feedback because this is likely to require the student to cross reference keyword based written assessment criteria with written feedback in order to develop an action plan that seeks to address weaknesses in their approach to assignments. Action planning is

discussed further on in this paper. Before then it is worth exploring the variety of assessment practice experienced by the international student before they travel from a predominantly non-English speaking environment to one fluent in English. This discussion requires only a partial view to illustrate the potential differences and the following provides a brief overview of assessment practice in a limited number of countries based on work by Paul Collins (2004).

### *International approaches to assessment practice: a brief overview*

With the increasing migration of students between countries, the potential for misunderstanding assessment practice where language use is critical clearly possesses the potential for much confusion for the student. This is exacerbated by the complexity of assessment practice within the UK and internationally. Collins (2004) identifies five approaches to indicating achievement levels, comprising:

- a) pass or fail (commonly used in competency based testing)
- b) letter grades (e.g. A,B,C,D, etc. with and without plus and minus variations)
- c) numerical grades (e.g. 1 excellent, 2 very good etc.)
- d) numerical scores (e.g. an achieved score out of a predetermined whole – 12 out of 20)
- e) percentage point marks  
(Collins 2004, p. 24)

In the UK, assessment conventions are said to be split into what is referred to as 'full range percentage marks, grade based marks and what one might call hybrid grade percentage systems' (Collins 2004, p. 27). The pass threshold is generally set at 40% for undergraduate and 50% for postgraduate studies. Collins uses examples of 'assessment reporting' from a review of thirteen institutions:

<i>percentage points</i>	Birmingham, Wales (Bangor), Reading, Liverpool, Oxford Brookes, Westminster, Cambridge;
<i>grade based</i>	Middlesex, Derby, Wolverhampton, Aberdeen;
<i>hybrid approach</i>	The Open University, Loughborough.

Beyond the UK, most European practice is apparently grade based, but in Germany the predominant system is numerical between 1 (high) and 5 (low) with the highest score and fail respectively at either end of a continuum, with an accompanying three sub grades for each number for greater accuracy. Hungary, Sweden and Switzerland do similar but in the reverse rank order of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Further afield, the United States of America (USA) seemingly favours letter grades, even though it sets the pass threshold at 60% by comparison with the UK. Specifically, Collins reports that York University in the USA employs a ten-grade letter scale with descriptors (2004, p. 30). In between the UK and USA, Canada and Australia are said to employ systems that use 50% as a pass threshold, but inconsistency is illustrated by Collins between The University of Calgary, The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, The University of

Technology Sydney, University of New South Wales and the University of South Australia.

Based on his review of these systems, and more, Collins attempts to summarise the arguments for and against what he calls 'fine grain percentage' and 'broad grade' assessment. His comparison is reproduced here in Table 5. One can only speculate here which of these might appeal to the international student in art and design, but it seems that the simpler distinction of quality, lack of subtlety, and likelihood of better written feedback associated with grade based marking, might be favoured against the simpler to understand, quantitatively favoured imprecision he suggests is characteristic of percentage point marking systems.

**Table 5.** Comparison of percentage point & letter grade marking. Source: Collins 2004, pp. 40–42

**Percentage based marking**

**For**

- it is simple to understand
- it provides for precision assessment and especially so for quantitatively based work and for multiple choice or short question tests (where marks are added together towards a larger whole)
- it is easy to rank order cohorts of students
- it can easily be used to calculate module and cohort etc. ... averages and standard deviation

**Grade based marking**

**For**

- simple distinctions of quality
- less chance of an error or doubts within a classification band (and consequently less worries and anxiety)
- less chance of assessment benchmark subtly or even dramatically changing when marking a large number of scripts
- Quicker marking times
- A greater chance of a sampler/double marker/external examiner agreeing with the first marker
- less chance of student challenge or appeal
- providing a broader and stronger (defensible and constructive) platform for extensive narrative feedback

**Against**

- risk of imprecision
- possibly longer timescales needed to mark
- greater chance of a disjunction between the percentage mark given and the written narrative
- greater chance of errors in adding and dividing etc. in bringing percentage marks together
- greater chance of second marker giving a different percentage score

**Against**

- an apparent lack of confidence in a lecturer to mark precisely
- a loss of fine grain differentiation (little is black or white ...)
- that it might be divisive and demotivating amongst students who perceive themselves (and who may be are) at the top, as compared to the bottom of the grade

This comparison provides a useful framework for further research beyond the scope of this paper. Research may be undertaken into the desirability for universal verbal descriptors that equate different marking systems to keyword achievement levels over an agreed scale of achievement. Ten levels seem to offer scope for a more refined use of language than the seven listed above in Table 1, but in Brown's (1997, p. 75) list of

class, verbal descriptor and literal grade there is inherent problems because these each indicate a different number of possibilities. For class, there are 6 options, verbal descriptors list 7 possibilities, and there are 13 letter grades!

Two ten percentage and grade division systems are presented below, comparing the earlier listed verbal descriptors proposed by Harland and Sawdon (2011) with those cited by Collins from York University in the USA. See Table 6. It is interesting to note that on these two ten division systems, only the word 'excellent' aligns, and words such as 'very good', 'good' and 'satisfactory' are misaligned slightly in the percentage system compared to the letter grade system, and whereas the former attempts to provide clear indicators for content (or lack of) in the use of 'deficient', 'insufficient' and 'insubstantial' below what would be considered a 'marginal' level of achievement, the letter based system indicates three pass levels of as 'marginally passing', 'barely passing' and 'passing'. 'Satisfactory' and 'fairly competent' are equal in the rank order and could be construed as representing similar levels of achievement.

**Table 6.** *Keyword comparison of percentage and letter grade systems.*

<b>Verbal descriptor by percentage</b>		<b>Verbal descriptor by letter grade</b>	
<i>Source: Harland and Sawdon 2012</i>		<i>Source: Collins 2004</i>	
90–100	Outstanding	A+	Exceptional
80–89	Excellent	A	Excellent
70–79	Rigorous	B+	Very good
60–69	Very Good	B	Good
50–59	Good	C+	Competent
40–49	Satisfactory	C	Fairly Competent
30–39	Marginal	D+	Passing
20–29	Insubstantial	D	Barely Passing
10–19	Insufficient	E	Marginally Passing
0–9	Deficient	F	Failing

Systems used by institutions and assessors are likely to have been determined by historical factors, inheritance and perhaps unwillingness to change the status quo. The variety of systems used internationally suggests that student migration has not been a major consideration. But there is a more fundamental issue that has been neglected in the literature on assessment regarding what students do with feedback. It is unclear what assessment means to students beyond an indicator of progress. What do students do once they receive their mark? How do they interpret feedback? Assessment and feedback is known to be an under-researched topic (Cramp 2011, Rae and Cochrane 2008). However, interest is growing (Pitts 2005) and although research into feedback dates back to the late 1970s (Pokorny and Pickford 2010) virtually none has been undertaken for first-year undergraduates (Cramp 2011: 114). Regarding assessment and feedback, there appears to be an absence of reporting about how practical tools for action planning are developed by academics for use by students. This paper attempts to fill this gap and takes a holistic approach by linking concerns to internationalization.

The following reports on a recent attempt to support students' response to feedback through action planning as part of a pedagogic research project: 'Feedback: facilitating reflection to promote learning.' This work was initiated by Caroline Smith at the Loughborough University Teaching Centre in conjunction with Emma Dresser at the Loughborough University Student Union, in collaboration with the author of this paper. The project benefitted from a Loughborough University Teaching Innovation Award with the intention to produce learning materials to help students make the most of their assessment feedback. The materials developed by the project can be viewed at [www.lufbra.net/voice/feedback/further/](http://www.lufbra.net/voice/feedback/further/).

### *Facilitating reflection to promote learning*

Receiving feedback is also a central skill of assessment. There is a range of reactions to feedback. At one end is passive, uncritical acceptance of advice. At the other is uncritical aggressive rejection of feedback. [...] A more mature response is to accept the feedback graciously and then consider it in light of one's own values and experience. (Brown, 1997: 5)

Recently in the UK student satisfaction surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) reveal a dissatisfaction about assessment and feedback and academics have been slow to respond to a need for useful, timely feedback. Even though staff aspire to produce useful feedback, there is a mistrust about how much notice is taken by students who overlook the opportunity to apply critical feedback to the next part of their learning. Yet, pedagogic researchers advocate that feedback should not be an afterthought or burden, but part of a process (Gibbs G., Simpson C., 2004) within which students are active participants in a process they are part of, rather than passive recipients (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) in a process done to them. Studies have a tendency to focus on how students use written feedback rather than how they make use of self-reflection (Glover C., Brown E., 2006 and Weaver M., 2006). Successive NSS results indicate that feedback is inadequate, leading to the National Union of Students (NUS) establishing guiding principles in 2009 that include the use of 'self-assessment' as a strong motivator for learning.

This project at Loughborough University drew on some of this available feedback literature and has piloted the use of a "Loughborough Students' Union feedback resource" with first-year undergraduate students in the School of the Arts commencing their studies in autumn 2011 (see <http://www.lufbra.net/voice/feedback/action/>). In order to support the requirement to accommodate different styles of student learning, a feedback resource was provided to students as hard copy and electronic versions and the acceptability of these formats has been investigated. The feedback resource contained an action plan (see Figure 2) which students were asked to complete in order to promote engagement with the feedback they receive, supporting their learning from experience and promoting the concept of self-assessment of work.

## My action plan

*To make your action plan as effective as possible please look at the feedback received from the lecturer for the piece of work*

<i>Module</i>		
<i>Assessment Title</i>		
<i>Key points made by lecturer</i>	<i>Positive or Critical</i>	
1.		
2.		
3.		
<i>Mark awarded for assessment</i>		
<i>How I will use positive feedback to enhance future work</i>		
<i>How I will improve on the areas that received critical feedback</i>		
<i>Things to do</i>	<i>By when?</i>	
1.		
2.		
3.		

Hepplestone, S. et al 2010

**Figure 2.** Action Plan tool for undergraduate students.

Source: <http://www.lufbra.net/voice/feedback/action/>

The intention was to guide a group of tutees in the use of an action-planning tool and address the following:

- Further introduce students in art and design to the use of assessment tools to enhance student learning;
- Assess the ability of students to undertake self-assessment;
- Compare how action planning might work alongside written feedback provided in advance of one-to-one summative tutorial feedback.

The project aims were to:

- Investigate the acceptability of a feedback resource amongst a sample of the student population.
- Gather student opinion on the feedback resource (ease of use, clarity, usefulness).
- To compare the format of the hard copy and electronic resource (ease of use, clarity, usefulness).
- To make recommendations relating to a University wide feedback resource dependent on these findings.
- To gather staff and student opinion on the use of 'guided reflection' using the feedback resource action-planning tool.

The project fitted into an existing pattern of formative and summative assessment on a semester long studio module that occupied approximately 85% of the syllabus. This included a mid-semester academic tutorial for which students are required to write self-evaluation statements against four assessment criteria headings previously mentioned. Students also make a final assessment presentation to two other students and a marking tutor, before receiving an individual feedback tutorial to discuss written summative remarks by the marking tutor that align with the intended learning outcomes. Usually, students see their summative feedback for the first time at the feedback tutorial, but this was adjusted for the purpose of this exercise and students were sent their summative assessment feedback in advance allowing for them to consider what actions they may take as a result of the feedback.

#### INITIAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT RESPONSE TO THE RESOURCE

The response to requests for student participation proved at first a stumbling block but provided some indication of how similar initiatives might be undertaken in future. However, further encouragement and subsequent reaction by more students suggests the exercise is worth reporting here. The initial intention had been to create focus group discussion from a cohort of 48 first year Graphic Communication students having distributed the resource at the beginning of their studies, but the response to requests for participation were disappointing. Only one student volunteered their time to participate in a focus group and they did not recall receiving the learning resource during induction but did recall the online version. They found the process of receiving a mark and written feedback before a tutorial feedback meeting really useful as it allowed them to prepare for the meeting using the action planning sheet in the learning resource, rather than 'making things up on the spot.' The student expressed that more people would look through the resource if it was given out by lectures and were told it would help them with doing their coursework now and in the future. Upon looking at the resource during the focus group, the student found it easy to use but explained the main difference was made by the session with the tutor. In response to this initial disappointing student involvement, a further email sent to cohort members

to complete a survey about the resource resulted in a total of 28 people starting the survey and 23 completing the survey. Of those, 80% read the resource and found it easy to use

### *Implications for international agendas*

Much of what is reported here demonstrates a reflexive approach to assessment and feedback pedagogy in art and design at Loughborough University School of the Arts. The discussion about adopting a keyword strategy for use in the application of assessment criteria, is linked to the project on promoting a reflexive approach to feedback by students in that the interpretation of language is at the core of both initiatives, and central to the provision of tools that intend to enhance student learning. This has exposed some difficulties associated with the use of a keyword strategy especially for international students. A lack of understanding certain keywords as they may be used by marking tutors might disadvantage overseas students and prohibit them from participating in the formulation of action plans. Clearly, a disjointed approach to student assessment, feedback and action planning may be further complicated by the needs of international students.

## **Conclusion**

In what may appear to some as a disjointed range of ideas discussed above, a holistic approach to a cycle that aligns assessment, written feedback and action planning has been the intention. The 'student perspective', often missing in the literature on assessment feedback discourse (Rae and Cochrane, 2008: 218), has been considered in terms of the opportunity for them to reflect and record responses to written feedback by introducing an action-planning tool. This encourages students to act on feedback for 'feed-forward' (Duncan, 2007, cited by Rae and Cochrane, 2008: 226) into subsequent modules.

Assessing student work using verbal descriptors to supplement class or grade indicators is likely to be problematic for international students unless keywords are utilised that carry meaning for all students, not just native English speakers. Some words, such as rigorous, have been shown to be problematic internationally. Other words are unstable regarding their position in a predetermined hierarchy and relationship to a class or grade. This is not helped by the variety of approaches to the scales used to mark student work in the UK and abroad. Overcoming this requires an inclusive approach to teaching, emphasising what the student does over the actions of a teacher and background of the student. Failure to achieve this limits the ability of students to reflect on their assessment feedback and develop action plans for future learning. The Higher Education sector in the UK has a significant responsibility to invest in assessment processes that equate with the growth of internationalisation since the early 1990s and the influx of students who make considerable commitment to move from their home to benefit from a long established culture of higher education. This paper has used new and existing data to highlight inconsistencies, make comparisons, identify weaknesses and identify research questions that may ultimately help international students understand the link between assessment criteria, written feedback and their reflection for action planning. Further questions such as: How



should a marking scale be divided? What keywords, or verbal descriptors, reflect this division and appeal to international students? Should better correlation exist between percentage figure, verbal descriptor and letter grade systems? These may help the cross-cultural transition required for successful international student learning.

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to Caroline Smith and Emma Dresser at Loughborough University, and Dr Karel van der Waarde at St Joost Academy of Art in The Netherlands.

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