



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Using National Student Survey (NSS) Qualitative Data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback

Citation for published version:

MacKay, JRD, Hughes, K, Marzetti, H, Lent, N & Rhind, S 2019, 'Using National Student Survey (NSS) Qualitative Data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback', *Higher Education Pedagogies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500](https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Higher Education Pedagogies

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Using National Student Survey (NSS) qualitative data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback

Jill R. D. MacKay, Kirsty Hughes, Hazel Marzetti, Neil Lent & Susan M. Rhind

To cite this article: Jill R. D. MacKay, Kirsty Hughes, Hazel Marzetti, Neil Lent & Susan M. Rhind (2019) Using National Student Survey (NSS) qualitative data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback, Higher Education Pedagogies, 4:1, 315-330, DOI: [10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500](https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 58





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Using National Student Survey (NSS) qualitative data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback

Jill R. D. MacKay ^a, Kirsty Hughes^a, Hazel Marzetti ^b, Neil Lent^b
and Susan M. Rhind^a

^aRoyal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; ^bInstitute of Academic Development, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Assessment and feedback are interrelated challenges for higher education, being perceived as key facets of the quality assurance of degrees, and yet commonly found to be sources of dissatisfaction for students. We performed a thematic analysis on the free-text comments of the National Student Survey for a large, Scottish, Russell Group university and found recurring themes of alienation versus belonging in how the students discussed assessment. We used Social Identity Theory to explore these themes and concluded that assessment can act as a barrier between staff and students, especially where students are not given effective feedback. When students feel their assessment excludes them from a group (such as their discipline), they express dissatisfaction and frustration. This study adds to the growing body of work encouraging a dialogic approach to ensure students are able to make the best use of feedback and suggests it may also have the encouraging side-effect of improving student satisfaction.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 March 2018
Revised 8 November 2018
Accepted 19 March 2019

KEYWORDS

Assessment and feedback;
national student survey;
NSS; assessment literacy;
disciplinary cultures

Introduction

Assessment and feedback: transaction or dialogue?

The efficacy of assessment and feedback is a key issue for higher education institutions and is the focus of research and debate in the educational literature, as publications such as this special edition attest. Assessment and feedback are seen as powerful influencers on students' academic behaviour (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and feedback is considered a crucial component of learning across educational settings and academic levels (Sadler, 2010; Vardi, 2013). The focus on feedback, its value, and what makes it effective, can lead to a tendency to conceptualise it as a commodity passed from markers to the student (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016). By contrast, research on effective assessment and feedback suggests feedback is better thought of as an active dialogic process (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010; McArthur & Huxham, 2013). This, more social,

perspective emphasises the need to focus on the whole of the feedback cycle, recognising the context in which feedback occurs, and highlights the importance of student engagement in this process (Carless, 2015). Dialogic feedback enables students to be independent, self-regulating learners, able to judge the quality of their own work (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 1985).

In what context do students experience feedback? From a broad perspective, they experience it within the culture of their institution. Becher and Trowler (2001) define 'culture' for higher education as '*sets of taken-for-granted values, attitudes, and ways of behaving, which are articulated through and reinforced by current practices among a group of people in a given context*' (p. 23). Trowler (2008) highlights that cultures should not be thought of as fixed, immutable entities, but classifications that can share and change characteristics over time. There can be university cultures, discriminating between institutions, but also disciplinary cultures at the level of student and faculty (Tierney & Lanford, 2017). For example, some higher education institutions possess a collegiate culture (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008), where research, scholarship and disciplines are highly prized. Bergquist and Pawlak highlighted the ancient Scottish institutions and Oxbridge as key proponents of this type of culture, as well as the German university system, with researchers having 'unfettered' access to resources. They acknowledge that this culture is older, and has been pressured to change as the higher education environment changes priorities, often highlighting student experience. On the other end of the scale, discipline cultures can reflect differences in academic practice across multiple higher education institutions. Nelson-Laird et al. (2008) used pre-existing data in faculty-wide surveys in the United States to explore disciplinary differences in measures associated with critical thinking and found that 'soft' fields, which promote faculty and student interaction, scored better on critical thinking measures. They acknowledged that their pre-existing dataset had not been designed to assess aspects of learning, such as student motivation, and that effect sizes were small, but still concluded that the discipline, and presumably its associated culture, had an effect on student learning.

Gunn (2014) considered that disciplinary cultures within universities could be better understood by separating them into four manifestations: formal practices, informal practices, cultural forms and moral order themes. She criticised a lack of research exploring the inconsistencies between what a discipline claims is its moral belief and the practices observed in the other aspects of the organisational culture. One source of inconsistency which may not yet have been fully surfaced is the difference between 'assessment literacy' and 'academic literacy'. In this paper, 'assessment literacy' is defined as the student's ability to understand academic standards and what is expected of them in relation to those standards including recognising quality work, and to self-regulate their learning through accurate evaluation of their own work, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and forming strategies to improve it (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher, & McPhail, 2013). 'Academic literacy' can be defined as the discipline-specific practices surrounding professional applications to take into account the contextual component of learning (Lea & Street, 1998). This is sometimes considered a meeting of the 'study skills' model, which considers writing and literacy as a cognitive skill, and the concept of 'academic socialisation' where students acquire the way of talking, writing and thinking about a subject based on that discipline's epistemological mores (Lea & Street, 2006; Northedge, 2003).

What do students say about assessment and feedback?

Implicit within the claim that assessment is ‘value-laden’ (Boud & Falchikov, 2007) is the understanding that it must be an important component of the student experience. One of the largest sources of data on student satisfaction with their assessment experience is the UK National Student Survey (NSS), a nation-wide survey of final-year full and part-time undergraduate higher education students. The survey was developed in order to provide standardised feedback for quality enhancement at a national level (Richardson, Slater, & Wilson, 2007). Before changes in 2017, the NSS consisted of 23 Likert-scale questions in eight areas, asking students about the teaching on their course, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, personal development, overall satisfaction, and satisfaction with their students’ union. There is also an open-ended question, ‘Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects of your course you would like to highlight?’ which is separated into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ comments, and an institution-specific question. A nation-wide analysis of NSS results suggests that assessment and feedback achieve lower overall satisfaction than other areas of the NSS in UK higher education institutions, with 68% of students agreeing that they received helpful feedback from faculty in 2015 (Bell & Brooks, 2017). In 2016, assessment and feedback related questions showed the lowest scores, averaging 73% agreement for full-time students (HEFCE, 2016). This reflects an ongoing pattern where assessment and feedback have consistently been identified as a challenging area as measured by the NSS scores (Williams, Kane, Sagu, & Smith, 2008).

It is worth questioning whether the poor quantitative NSS scores reflect a ‘true’ dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback for students. The NSS often receives criticism for vague questions (Bennett & Kane, 2014; Blair, Orr, & Yorke, 2012; Cocksedge & Taylor, 2013) and possible unreliability of the quantitative data (Yorke, 2009). In addition, data from the NSS is more often reported in terms of ‘agreement’, collapsing a 5-point Likert scale down to a binary scale, necessitating the loss of some ordinal data. The NSS free-text data has generally been less thoroughly explored than the quantitative, but may provide more detailed information about the student experience in relation to assessment and feedback practice. The lack of published research on the free-text comments is possibly because of constraints on using the data, as it should not be possible to identify individual students from their responses to the NSS (IPSOS Mori, 2017). It may also be because the volume of free-text data collected by the NSS is considerable, and qualitative analysis is time-consuming. One study found broad agreement between the qualitative and quantitative results within one institution (Langan, Scott, Partington, & Oczujda, 2015), but this link has yet to be explored in other institutions. Another approach has been to use text-mining algorithms to explore word frequencies to provide broad themes (Buckley, 2012). Buckley’s report acknowledged that many institutions use the free-text data as prompts for discussion in focus groups, both to provide more data on a subject and to deal with the restrictions placed on reporting qualitative data. The NSS free-text data is a large source of data on student experience, captured in a standardised manner, which is rarely fully explored.

In this study, we analysed free-text data for a large, Scottish, Russell Group institution as part of ongoing quality assurance and enhancement as an outcome of internal and external institutional peer review. During this routine work, we observed that

positive experiences for students were often expressed in terms of their sense of belonging to their discipline, feeling valued by staff, and having a strong sense of place. There is research to suggest that a sense of 'belonging' can have positive influence on psychological well-being in students, because of a belief that becoming part of a desired group (e.g. graduating with your degree in your chosen discipline) will help you achieve your desired outcomes (Cameron, 1999). This is connected to a student social identity (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006) in that a 'sense of belonging' is part of self-definition in terms of individual group membership (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, and Hendres (2011) found that students who demonstrated a strong 'student identity' were also more likely to show deep approaches to learning. In this work, we associate the qualities of deeply engaging with a discipline with self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and assessment literacy.

In this study, negative student experiences were often couched in terms of being alienated from their academic community, with a recurring narrative of 'us' (students) versus 'them' (staff), and this was particularly notable when students discussed their assessment experiences. We looked for a theoretical framework to examine this phenomenon of 'belonging' which would be applicable across the institution, but also recognised that while a student of chemistry and a student of history may have the same feelings about their experiences, their goals (to graduate from chemistry and history, respectively), were discipline-specific. The importance of the 'us vs them' narrative led us to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is built around the idea that an individual's sense of self relates to the social groups to which they belong (e.g.: student, chemist, musician, parent). This means that there can be multiple 'identities' for a person depending on which group memberships are most salient in a given situation. SIT, therefore, focusses on trying to understand processes and relations within and between social groups (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). It has its roots within discrimination research (Tajfel, 1969) particularly in how the cognitive processes of categorisation and assimilation produce groupings within the human mind (Turner, 1975). The theory emerged from studies which found that artificially constructing groups with trivial membership criteria was enough to create in-group and out-group discrimination known as the minimal group paradigm (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brown, 1988; Dobbs & Crano, 2001). It was observed that individuals tend to favour those whom they see as members of their own group (the 'in-group') over those they see as belonging to another group ('out-group'). Shared norms and positive in-group attitudes are two components of how individuals can categorise themselves as part of their social group (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Where individuals see themselves as able to move from one group into a more esteemed in-group (Hirschman, 1970) they may choose to try and take up membership of that group. This shifts the emphasis away from the group and towards individual agency, as the individual needs to see a way through the groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) discuss how a lack of mobility can reinforce intergroup tensions. Where there is more intergroup permeability, there are likely to be higher levels of individual rather than social identity. Conversely, where relations between groups are highly stratified,

there is less capacity for individuals to move from one group to the other. This can emphasise intergroup relations rather than the interpersonal. In such situations, individuals are more likely to show uniformity in their behaviour towards perceived ‘out-group’ members (p.279). Institutionalised differences between groups damage the self-esteem of ‘subordinate’ groups (Pg 280–281).

In Higher Education institutions there are usually a number of clearly defined pre-formed groups to which SIT can be applied, e.g. staff versus students, discipline versus discipline, and even institution versus institution. The defining paradigms are therefore far from minimal, and it is likely that students will see themselves as part of a student group, and teaching staff as part of an academic group. These groups can also be highly stratified which may lead to increased tensions between the groups with the ‘subordinate’ student group having lower self-esteem and a more ‘us’ vs ‘them’ view of staff and vice versa. In this study, we wanted to explore through the free-text NSS data how this scenario might play out within students’ experiences of assessment.

Methods

Study conception

As part of a review of student experience at the institution, the research group targeted the 2016 NSS free-text data for detailed exploration with the aim of identifying data themes across the institution, mainly ‘what happens’ and ‘how do students interact with the institution’ (MacKay, Hughes, Lent, Marzetti, & Rhind, 2018). This work (stage one and two) allowed for a second research question to be identified which arose from the data, namely, how do assessment and feedback contribute to a student’s sense of belonging to their discipline and their university? This institutional case study is described in stage three below.

Ethics

This study was approved by the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee in 2018, Reference 1262. Due to privacy restrictions on the NSS data, quotes in this article have been paraphrased, as well as reported only at a college level (i.e. group of related schools) to respect participant anonymity. The peer reviewers have been offered the opportunity to review the actual quote alongside the paraphrased quote.

Data collection

The 2016 NSS was sent to 3908 final year students at the institution between January and April 2016. There were 3080 participants, a response rate of 78.8%. Overall satisfaction scores in 2016 were down from previous years (–4% from 2015). The free-text responses were broken down into three questions ‘Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects of your course you would like to highlight?’ (Positive and Negative), and ‘What one thing would do most to improve the quality of your student experience?’ (University Specific Question). The institutional structure is organised by college, school, and programme. The free-text responses can identify responses to the level of the programme where there are more than 10 students enrolled, however this analysis was

performed at the school and college level, and all reporting is done at the college level. Where we refer to ‘discipline’ cultures, we are discussing that at a school level within this analysis.

Stage one: data validation

The first stage of the study explored whether this data could be used to identify the research questions of interest to the institution, what happens to students, and how do students interact with the institution. This stage was intended to validate the methodology in terms of investigator triangulation (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999) to explore whether the varying ontological and epistemological approaches of the researchers might diversely impact their analysis. Initially three schools were selected for exploration by JM, HM, KH and NL. All four researchers independently coded the same 20 responses for each school to identify themes relating to the research questions. There was considerable overlap in the independent coding and no instances of a theme that was not recognised by the other researchers. From this data, the researchers identified seven themes which are summarised in Table 1. Note, these themes were related to ‘what happens’ to students and how students interact with the institution. It was considered permissible for themes to overlap and to be featured in all three question-responses, e.g. a comment about organisation could be positive, negative, or the one thing that the university could improve on. At this stage, it was decided that differentiation between the three questions should be treated with caution, as it was noted that students often responded similarly to all three questions. If a student expressed strong opinions they would reiterate this in the ‘negative’, ‘positive’ and ‘one thing’ question, regardless of what the question might categorise the response as. For example, students may speak very positively about a lecturer within the negative question if that lecturer helped to alleviate some of their negative experiences.

Stage two: school-level analysis

At this stage, the schools were divided between KH, HM and JM for further analysis. Each school was openly coded by a single researcher using the structure from the previous stage, however the researcher was free to bring in new themes or condense themes as appropriate. These analyses were reviewed by the wider group to further explore and refine the new themes that had been identified in an open thematic coding format. There was the opportunity to perform some data triangulation (Twining, Heller, Nussbaum, & Tsai, 2017) by comparing these results to the results from the

Table 1. Seven broad themes extracted from the NSS 2016 responses and some of their sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
Organisation	Good and bad organisation
Community and alienation	Student feedback not valued
Facilities	
Student concerns and self-development	Confidence, enjoyment of materials, help with living in Edinburgh
Learning and teaching	Language skills (staff), consistency of teaching
Assessment and feedback	Exam timetabling, assessments not fitting course, assessments too challenging, grade bands confusing, marking inconsistent, feedback late, no feed-forward
Staff have research focus	The staff were considered experts in their field, or may prefer research to teaching.

teaching awards analysis (EUSA, 2016), where similar themes were found. At this stage, we realised that student identity and its relationship with assessment and feedback were featuring prominently in the data, and this led to our third research question, which forms the basis of this paper.

Stage three: assessment & feedback and student identity

After analysing all 2016 NSS data with an open thematic-coding approach, we identified that there were links between the themes of ‘assessment and feedback’ and ‘student identity’. As we had identified this once with our thematic analysis, we decided to use theoretical triangulation to bring in a new theoretical framework with which to explore this data (Elliott et al., 1999; Twining et al., 2017). Our key observation was that students characterised themselves and staff as two distinct groups, and there were high tensions between the two. Staff ‘did’ assessment to students, but when staff were perceived to be caring, this was very highly valued by students. Students characterised themselves as ‘second class’ or less valued than other groups, such as research students:

For four years I have been treated like a second-class citizen compared to the postgraduate research students. – Science College

Undergraduates are not important. Research students and research projects are the priority. – Arts College

The inherent structure of the university is of a student group and a staff group, with perhaps some progression through the student group towards a ‘practitioner’ group. Assessment could therefore be viewed as a barrier which a student must move through in order to leave the less esteemed student group. SIT, as a theory of intergroup relations, allowed us to explore this tension, although admittedly only from the student’s point of view. We re-explored this data in light of the structural disparity between the groups and what factors reduced the tensions between the two. Our key application of SIT in these results is the theory that the less agency someone is afforded, the more tensions exist between the groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). When students are not supported in academic literacy their lack of agency and ability to deal with assessments greatly builds tension, and we will use the NSS data to demonstrate incidences of this.

Responses from all schools which were considered to relate to assessment and feedback were collated and explored at a college level, and examined for their relationship with student identity. We observed instances of one group (students) versus another group (staff) and SIT was a useful framework to consider this, and to highlight the tensions between the groups in the assessment and feedback context.

Results and discussion

Belonging and alienation

Throughout the free-text responses to the NSS, the students commonly expressed a desire for ‘belonging’. They wanted to feel part of a larger group, and interestingly, they primarily wanted this group to be their discipline, rather than the institution as a whole. For example, some students spoke positively about ‘meeting like-minded

people' and 'making new friends', and there were requests for individual schools to host more social events, allowing staff and students to mix.

In third year we went on a field trip which was great. We got to know our classmates and the university staff and lecturers on a much more personal level. It was really exciting to come back to fourth year after that. – Science College

The social part of the subject is very exclusive and teaching is intimidating. For me, there needs to be more social parts of the course like a common room or base. With limited class time it is hard to bond with classmates. – Arts College

Students were sensitive to perceived disciplinary hierarchies, such as postgraduate/undergraduate divisions. They expressed great frustration when they felt undervalued by teaching staff, and this was particularly evident when they felt staff prioritised research over teaching. This was not just disinterested lecturers, although this was a common complaint, but also in support services, for example when careers guidance did not take into account a student's preferences.

All careers guidance was PhD focussed, there is more I could do with this degree than research – Science College

This particular quote is interesting to explore from a SIT perspective. The advice the student received suggested a singular career pathway for a particular group of students. Tajfel and Turner (1986) stated that where individuals see limited mobility, they are more likely enact group rather than individual identity. A constant research focus, even from those out with teaching, may constantly remind some students they do not share the university's espoused values.

It is important to highlight that the students did not view research itself as a negative thing. They valued staff with excellent research careers when they made the students feel invited into the discipline.

I am privileged to be taught by leaders in the field. They are all interested, enthusiastic, and involved in their teaching. They make complex ideas simple and inspired me to actively research fields I had not previously considered. – Arts College

All staff are leading figures in their research areas, and we study areas they are heavily involved in. This makes learning more engaging which I really like. – Science College

Conversely, where staff seemed to guard their research, or prioritise it above the students, the perceived research focus became a way of reinforcing group differences between staff and students. If a highly respected researcher was 'too busy' to teach, then students felt excluded and this provoked strong negative feelings.

In the first two years I was just a number, and the teaching was very poor. The lecturers wanted to research and only taught because they had to. – Arts College

The school has been making an attempt to improve the staff-student relationship since I started, to no avail, and I think it is because they tweak small assessments. They should adopt an overall ethos of students being the main priority, instead of bringing in money and research. – Medical College

It should also be noted that the students were very willing to align themselves with staff members they were in close contact with, and would identify with staff against injustices

perceived to be driven by the wider institution. From a SIT perspective, having a common ‘enemy’ arguably reinforced intergroup cohesion allowing members of the student group to sympathise with the experiences of members of the teaching staff group.

Sadly these staff try very hard but cannot change senior management decisions that negatively affect our teaching. – Science College

The best tutor I had did not get their contract renewed, despite winning teaching prizes and their passion for teaching. They were a great source of support, quick at marking, and great at feedback (I got a whole typed page of comments and was urged to come and discuss the work). – Arts College

Assessment and feedback

The novel aspect of this analysis is the explicit link between the student’s perception of assessment fairness, and how their sense of belonging to their discipline affects their overall satisfaction at university. We propose that considering how assessment and feedback can serve to alienate students from their discipline through reinforcing intergroup tensions can demonstrate yet another reason why assessment literacy needs to build upon the dialogic principles proposed in the literature. This relates to the building of academic literacy alongside assessment literacy. Where feedback does not include the more sociocultural aspects of a discipline it will always be seen as frustrating for the student. Staff should be transparent about how they use their discipline experiences to assess work, incorporating this within the feedback. In SIT terms, this would enable students to feel more a part of a discipline group than a student group. This has been discussed before in terms of the limitations of assessment criteria. Where academics are not transparent about the criteria they are using, even if those criteria are variable, students will feel frustrated and unable to act on feedback (Bloxham, den-Outer, Hudson, & Price, 2016). One student for example highlighted their dissatisfaction with their relationship with the faculty while discussing how assessment regulations alienated them from their discipline group (school):

“Contact with the school comes from eight meetings over the four years with your personal tutor, who are sometimes helpful, but sometimes take no interest in us. This makes you feel invisible to the school and you have very little contact with the faculty unless you join a society. This feeling that the faculty does not value students’ academic progression is reinforced by the pedantic coursework submission regulations. Other departments can accept electronic submissions, but our department needs a paper copy at a different deadline, and if you miss this deadline you are penalised.” – Arts College

This may reflect Gunn’s (2014) suggested conflict between espoused moral beliefs and observed wider practice and how it can affect a student’s perception of their intersubjectivity. While students expressed a number of desires surrounding assessment, such as an appetite for increased opportunities for authentic assessment and more formative assessment, the ‘fairness’ of an assessment was often linked to the students’ sense of belonging. Some students highlighted this in terms of there being one set of rules for ‘staff’ and another for ‘students’, further reinforcing the intergroup difference.

My grades are returned late which is unfair, because if I hand work in late I am penalised. – Arts College

Lecturers are awful at helping. If you email them with their title (Dr/Professor), they don't even write your name in their reply. There's no common courtesy. – Science College

By contrast, where students received extensive one-to-one support, they were keen to highlight it. We would note that students were generally less able to articulate what good support looked like within the NSS comments, often saying support was 'good'.

My tutor (I don't know about others) gave me outstanding dissertation support. – Arts College

Staff encourage you to critically analyse work and then they do the same on your feedback to help you progress. – Arts College

Across the institution, students identified barriers regarding assessment and feedback. Some students iterated a belief that very high or excellent grades were not awarded on principle, and so were impossible to achieve regardless of the effort put in. Because effort cannot regulate performance, the SIT perspective suggests that assessment becomes a group paradigm separating students from staff. The informal practice of never awarding high grades may also give students the message 'you will never be good enough', creating an 'us vs them' mentality. Elsewhere in the comments, findings regarding assessment and feedback closely aligned with the existing socio-cultural perspectives in the literature. Feedback was important to the students being able to understand what was expected of them and how to produce good work within their programme and disciplines. Students wanted feedback that helped them to improve their grades but demonstrated frustration when they felt assessment was unfair, or there was no help. A number of students wrote of receiving feedback that was ineffective, especially when it was late, which was seen as another 'unfair' barrier that highlighted inter-group differences.

My presentation marks were unfair and depended on my peers. My mark did not tally with my feedback (e.g. my feedback said 'good' and didn't explain my result). – Science College

The students did not value feedback if they could not make use of it. Barriers to usage included:

- (1) Feedback not arriving when expected (disrupting student's own plans and creating a double standard where students are penalised for late submissions but staff are not penalised for failing to adhere to previously agreed standards)

Feedback does not help me improve and often marks are not given back on time which is not fair because students are penalised for not meeting deadlines, staff should be penalised too. – Arts College

- (1) 2. Feedback not being available prior to the next piece of assessment (possibly a course design issue)

I have often received feedback too late to change things for my exam. The third (final) piece of coursework was handed in before I received feedback from the first one. How can I tackle coursework without feedback? You know the numbers of students you have so why is the marking load a surprise? – Science College

- (1) 3. Feedback no longer being relevant to the next piece of assessment (a course design issue)

[as quote]‘Feedback was not always helpful. I have never received feedback and been able to see what I could change for the next essay.’ – Arts College

- (2) 4. Feedback not being recognised as feedback (e.g. verbal feedback not being signposted, e.g. being perceived as ‘just a chat’)

“We want feedback on our exams, not just a mark.” – Medical College

- (1) 5. Inconsistency in staff marking of assignments which results in feedback that is seen as inherently unreliable, meaning that across courses feedback is not viewed as useful.

“[One Thing You Would Change] I want the marking of essays to be more consistent, and for tutors to be clear about what they do and do not want.” – Science College

Of these, the fifth barrier is what the students were most sensitive to. From the student perspective, if staff cannot be trusted to agree with one another then the assessment will always be inherently unfair. Some of this may be viewed as students’ inability to interpret academic standards, but it cannot be the whole picture. The implicit discipline-based criteria that academics use to make value judgements, as discussed by Bloxham et al. (2016) and Gunn (2014), serve to alienate students. From the SIT perspective, it creates a group paradigm that separates the staff and student groups. Students cannot perceive how to overcome this paradigm because feedback does not accurately reflect what a student must do in order to meet the implicit criteria as well as the explicit criteria, and so the tensions between the groups increase. Some of this may be that staff themselves are not well-equipped to articulate their own standards, either because they are not able to apply common marking standards to their work, or because they do not recognise their own implicit criteria. There is often a perceived conflict with academic literacy in that it lacks transparency (Bloxham, 2012), however we would argue that the results of this analysis suggest that a more dialogic approach to assessment can ease inter-group tensions, and help students feel they are early-practitioners within their discipline group. If the student is not encouraged to find their sense of belonging within their discipline, they will find their sense of belonging elsewhere.

The use of social identity theory in understanding assessment and feedback

In this analysis, we chose to use SIT as a form of methodological triangulation. Theoretical triangulation seeks to explore phenomena from multiple theoretical standpoints to provide new information (Denzin, 1989), but it can be challenging to unite the methodological differences in various qualitative approaches (Flick, 2004). Much has already been written about the importance of assessment and feedback, and the growing

body of work exploring assessment literacy and the importance of dialogic approaches to feedback has served as a backbone to this research. We chose to use SIT because of the interesting finding of 'belonging' in the early stages of analysis, but in this type of data, we cannot be completely sure of 'cause' and 'effect'. Are students alienated because of assessment, or is assessment poor because students are alienated from their groups? Further, SIT is not a perfect theory, and the NSS data is challenging to work with (see introduction). To better understand assessment and feedback and its effects on student experience we need a diverse range of methods, data, and samples. We feel this case study within our institution further underlines the importance of socio-cultural approaches to assessment and feedback, but similar work can and should be replicated within other institutions, in order to provide data validation, and with yet more theoretical approaches. For example, Communities of Practice theory may provide a more actionable set of findings for how programmes can be designed to teach assessment and academic literacy. However, it would be foolish to ignore the implications of the 'us versus them' mentality when we consider program design and student satisfaction (see below).

The utility of pre-existing datasets for qualitative analysis

Pre-existing datasets may offer the opportunity for practical exploration of many theories and tools, with acknowledgement of some of their shortcomings. There are some challenges inherent within pre-existing datasets, such as a lack of flexibility. Although we were interested in the interplay between the students' experiences as articulated in their NSS free text responses and their disciplinary cultures, we observed a consistent pattern of responses across the different areas. Essentially, at a school level, students could be happy in many different ways, but much of the unhappiness came because they felt they were not part of the school group. This school group may not be 'real', or may be a function of the highly collegiate structure of ancient Scottish universities, that Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) described. It is difficult to determine this from the data because the NSS questions do not ask for particularly 'fine-grained' responses from respondents, so our capacity to explore the detail of the students' experiences in relation to their disciplines was limited. The NSS is a broad-scope tool which was not designed as a vehicle to surface disciplinary differences in methods of thinking, however this work demonstrates that sophisticated analyses are possible at an institutional level. We are aware that different disciplines do have their own cultures, practices, norms and ways of thinking (Northedge, 2003; Northedge & McArthur, 2009). It is likely therefore that more focused research within disciplines could add detail to understanding students' experiences of inclusion/exclusion and the role of assessment and feedback in influencing their experience.

To further explore disciplinary differences, one could explore disciplines across different institutions, which would necessitate the sharing of NSS data across those institutions. This may be sensitive, as NSS data is now used to rank institutions and compete for student places. Such work, however, would offer a fascinating insight into the relative influence of discipline and University culture on the student experience. For example, it would be interesting to explore if this 'belongingness' phenomenon explained why assessment consistently scores lower in Scotland than in the rest of the

UK. It would also be interesting to compare this to recent work which suggests that school culture, not discipline or institution, is the greatest driver of variation in NSS overall satisfaction (Burgess, Senior, & Moores, 2018)

Future assessment and feedback practices

There has been a tendency to view the enhancement of assessment and feedback as if it is technical problem with procedure-driven solutions (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). While there is recognition that assessment and feedback are more about dialogue and shared understanding of assessment criteria, the assessment–feedback relationship still occurs within the wider set of interactions of the socio-cultural context of programmes and institutions. This includes the need for quality assurance, and the challenge of how to measure quality within education, most recently debated in the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework (Shattock, 2018). Policy decisions can be made and structural improvements put in place but if success depends, even partially, on students’ general relationship with their institution and discipline/local culture, then these operational changes are simply not enough. As educators, we need to be aware of the socio-cultural context that assessment and feedback take place in. We need to be aware that students are not yet practitioners of our discipline, and that student dissatisfaction can be intense. Students want to feel valued, and that to some extent that they belong to their institutional and disciplinary communities in ways that enable them to develop their independence, instead of being told ‘you should know this’ (Northedge, 2003). They are not ‘just students’, but a part of their chosen discipline and institution, for however long a time. Assessment is an important tool for learning, and for building these relationships. One of the facets of authentic assessment, as described by Sambell et al. (2013) is that students should feel like they are ‘working within’ the discipline rather than ‘learning about’ the discipline. Part of this would involve shared values and understandings between staff and student.

We are still at the stage of reporting our findings within the institution, but this work has reinforced to us the importance of program level design in assessment and feedback, in helping students to become part of their discipline. We aim to promote a positive social identity by tackling the five barriers to feedback identified in this study, especially where program design issues occur, and highlighting the many positive examples in the student comments, such as field trips and social spaces. We are also keen to highlight to students that building assessment literacy involves also the socio-cultural aspects of disciplinary practice. Ultimately, we aim to provide a learning environment for students where they become part of the group, and are not assessed by an unknowable and unpredictable ‘other’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Jill R. D. MacKay  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7134-4829>

Hazel Marzetti  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4555-2258>

References

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M.A. (1988). Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18(4), 317–334. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2420180403
- Ajjawi, R., & Boud, D. (2017). Researching feedback dialogue: An interactional analysis approach. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(2), 252–265. doi:10.1080/02602938.2015.1102863
- Becher, T., & Trowler, P.R. (2001). *Academic tribes and territories: Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines*. The society for research into higher education & Open University Press (Vol. 31, 2nd ed.). SRHE & the Open University Press. doi:10.1306/74D70B87-2B21-11D7-8648000102C1865D
- Bell, A.R., & Brooks, C. (2017). What makes students satisfied? A discussion and analysis of the UK's national student survey. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, (September), 1–25. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2017.1349886
- Bennett, R., & Kane, S. (2014). Students' interpretations of the meanings of questionnaire items in the National Student Survey. *Quality in Higher Education*, 20(2), 129–164. doi:10.1080/13538322.2014.924786
- Bergquist, W.H., & Pawlak, K. (2008). *Engaging the six cultures of the academy: Revised and expanded edition of the four cultures of the academy* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Billig, M., & Tajfel, H. (1973). Social categorization and similarity in intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 3(1), 27–52. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2420030103
- Blair, B., Orr, S., & Yorke, M. (2012). *Erm, That Question.. I Think I Probably Would've Just Put Something in the Middle and Sort of Moved on to the Next One, Because I Think It's Really Unclear: How art and design students understand and interpret the national student survey*. *Group for learning in art and design*.
- Bliuc, A.M., Ellis, R.A., Goodyear, P., & Hendres, D.M. (2011). Understanding student learning in context: Relationships between university students' social identity, approaches to learning, and academic performance. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 26, 417–433. doi:10.1007/s10212-011-0065-6
- Bloxham, S. (2012). 'You can see the quality in front of your eyes': Grounding academic standards between rationality and interpretation. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(2), 185–204. doi:10.1080/13538322.2012.711071
- Bloxham, S., & Campbell, L. (2010). Generating dialogue in assessment feedback: Exploring the use of interactive cover sheets. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 291–300. doi:10.1080/02602931003650045
- Bloxham, S., den-Outer, B., Hudson, J., & Price, M. (2016). Let's stop the pretence of consistent marking: Exploring the multiple limitations of assessment criteria. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(3), 466–481. doi:10.1080/02602938.2015.1024607
- Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (2007). Introduction: Assessment for the longer term. In David Boud & Nancy Falchikov (Eds.), *Rethinking assessment in higher education: Learning for the longer term* (pp. 3–13). Routledge.
- Brown, R. (1988). *Group processes: Dynamics within and between groups* (1st ed.). Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.
- Buckley, A. (2012). *Making it count: Reflecting on the national student survey in the process of enhancement*. *Higher Education Academy*.
- Burgess, A., Senior, C., & Moores, E. (2018). A 10-year case study on the changing determinants of university student satisfaction in the UK. *PloS one*, 1–15. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0192976
- Cameron, J.E. (1999). Social identity and the pursuit of possible selves: Implications for the psychological well-being of university students. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 3(3), 179–189. doi:10.1037/1089-2699.3.3.179
- Carless, D. (2015). Exploring learning-oriented assessment processes. *Higher Education*, 69(6), 963–976. doi:10.1007/s10734-014-9816-z

- Cocksedge, S.T., & Taylor, D.C.M. (2013). The national student survey: Is it just a bad DREEM? *Medical Teacher*, 35(12), e1638–e1643. doi:10.3109/0142159X.2013.835388
- Denzin, N. (1989). Triangulation. In J. Keeves (Ed.), *Educational research, methodology, and measurement: An international handbook* (p. 511). Toronto: Pergamon Press.
- Dobbs, M., & Crano, W.D. (2001). Outgroup accountability in the minimal group paradigm: Implications for aversive discrimination and social identity theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(3), 355–364. doi:10.1177/0146167201273009
- Dunworth, K., & Sanchez, H.S. (2016). Perceptions of quality in staff-student written feedback in higher education: A case study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(5), 576–589. doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1160219
- Elliott, R., Fischer, C.T., & Rennie, D.L. (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 38, 215–229. doi:10.1348/014466599162782
- EUSA. (2016). *What does good teaching look like to students? An analysis of teaching awards nomination data*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Student Association.
- Flick, U. (2004). Triangulation in qualitative research. In U. Flick, E. von Kardorff, & I. Steinke (Eds.), *A Companion to qualitative research* (pp. 432). Glasgow: Sage Publications.
- Gunn, V. (2014). Mimetic desire and intersubjectivity in disciplinary cultures: Constraints or enablers to learning in higher education? *Studies in Continuing Education*, 36(1), 67–82. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2013.787981
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2923.2009.03542.x
- HEFCE. (2016). National Student Survey results 2016 - Higher Education Funding council for England. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20170110114820/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/results/2016/Accessed08/04/2019>
- Hirschman, A.O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press.
- Hogg, M.A., & Terry, D.J. (2000). Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 121–140. doi:10.2307/30040678
- Hogg, M.A., Terry, D.J., & White, K.M. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58(4), 255–269. doi:10.2307/2787127
- Langan, A.M., Scott, N., Partington, S., & Oczujda, A. (2015). Coherence between text comments and the quantitative ratings in the UK's national student survey. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 9486(February), 1–14. doi:10.1080/0309877X.2014.1000281
- Lea, M.R., & Street, B.V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157–172. doi:10.1080/03075079812331380364
- Lea, M.R., & Street, B.V. (2006). The 'academic literacies' model: Theory and applications. *Theory into Practice*, 45(4), 366–377. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4504
- MacKay, J.R.D., Hughes, K., Lent, N., Marzetti, H., & Rhind, S.M. (2018). What do Edinburgh students want? A mixed methods analysis of NSS 2016 free text data. In *The University of Edinburgh learning and teaching conference: inspiring learning* (pp. 19). Edinburgh.
- McArthur, J., & Huxham, M. (2013). Feedback Unbound: From master to usher. In S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless, & M. Taras (Eds.), *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education: Developing Dialogue With Students* (pp. 92–102). London
- Meeuwisse, M., Severiens, S.E., & Born, M.P. (2010). Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups. *Research in Higher Education*, 51(6), 528–545. doi:10.1007/s11162-010-9168-1
- Mori, I.P.S.O.S. (2017). The national student survey privacy statement. *TheStudentSurvey.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/privacy-statement.php>
- Nelson Laird, T.F., Shoup, R., Kuh, G.D., & Schwarz, M.J. (2008). The effects of discipline on deep approaches to student learning and college outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, 49(6), 469–494. doi:10.1007/s11162-008-9088-5

- Nicol, D.J., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199–218. doi:10.1080/03075070600572090
- Northedge, A. (2003). Enabling participation in academic discourse. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(2), 169–180. doi:10.1080/1356251032000052429
- Northedge, A., & McArthur, J. (2009). Guiding students into a discipline: The significance of the teacher. In C. Kreber (Ed.), *The University and its disciplines: Teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary boundaries* (pp. 107–118). New York: Routledge.
- Richardson, J.T.E., Slater, J.B., & Wilson, J. (2007). The national student survey: Development, findings and implications. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(5), 557–580. doi:10.1080/03075070701573757
- Sadler, D.R. (1985). The Origins and Functions of Evaluative Criteria. *Educational Theory*, 35(3), 285–297. doi:10.1111/j.1741-5446.1985.00285.x
- Sadler, D.R. (2010). Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 535–550. doi:10.1080/02602930903541015
- Sambell, Kay (2013). Engaging students through assessment. In: Dunne, Elisabeth and Owen, Derfel, (eds.) *The student engagement handbook: practice in higher education*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, UK, pp.379–396.
- Shattock, M. (2018). Better informing the market? The teaching excellence framework in british higher education. *International Higher Education*, 92, 21–22. doi:10.6017/ihe.2018.92.10283
- Smith, C.D., Worsfold, K., Davies, L., Fisher, R., & McPhail, R. (2013). Assessment literacy and student learning: The case for explicitly developing students ‘assessment literacy’. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(1), 44–60. doi:10.1080/02602938.2011.598636
- Tajfel, H. (1969). Cognitive Aspects of Prejudice. *Journal of Biosocial Science Supplement*, 1 (Suppl), 173–191. doi:10.1017/S0021932000023336
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 33–47. doi:10.1016/j.ijhydene.2017.07.057
- Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In: Worchel, S. and Austin, W.G., Eds., *Psychology of Intergroup Relation*, Hall Publishers, Chicago, 7–24.
- Tierney, W.G., & Lanford, M. (2017). Research in higher education: Cultural perspectives. In J. Shin & P. Teixeira (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of international higher education systems and institutions* (pp. 1–6). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer. doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1
- Trowler, P. (2008). *Cultures and change in higher education : Theories and practices*. (N. Entwistle & R. King Eds.). China: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, J.C. (1975). Social comparison and social identity: Some prospects for intergroup behavior. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 5(1), 5–34. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2420050102
- Twining, P., Heller, R.S., Nussbaum, M., & Tsai, C.C. (2017). Some guidance on conducting and reporting qualitative studies. *Computers and Education*, 106, A1–A9. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2016.12.002
- Vardi, I. (2013). Effectively feeding forward from one written assessment task to the next. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(5), 599–610. doi:10.1080/02602938.2012.670197
- Williams, J., Kane, D., Sagu, S., & Smith, E. (2008). Assessment and feedback issues. *Exploring the national student survey*. The Higher Education Academy.
- Yorke, M. (2009). ‘Student experience’ surveys: Some methodological considerations and an empirical investigation. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(6), 721–739. doi:10.1080/02602930802474219
- Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Prebble, T. (2006). Being learner centred: One way to improve student retention? *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), 587–600. doi:10.1080/03075070600923418