A crucial graduate attribute? Embedding feedback literacy into curricula across higher education

Kieran Balloo[1], Naomi Winstone[1], and David Carless[2]

[1]University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom

[2]University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Introduction

In contemporary discourse around assessment and feedback in higher education, the role of the student in the process is gaining prominence. Rather than a cognitivist transmission model, key scholars advocate a socio-constructivist approach where students' engagement with and use of feedback is seen as critical to realising the impact of feedback on learning outcomes (Carless, 2015). Students' capacities for using feedback form part of their feedback literacy.

Carless and Boud (2018) propose that feedback literacy involves students having: an appreciation for the use of feedback and their role in the process; the ability to make judgements about their own and others' work; and the ability to manage the affective nature of feedback. These inter-related features should then enable students to take action based on their feedback.

Whilst pedagogic models for the development of feedback literacy have been developed (see, for example, Winstone, Mathlin, & Nash, 2019; Värlander, 2008), these interventions are typically separate from the core curriculum. If the development of feedback literacy is to be viewed as a core graduate attribute that supports students' future work capacities as well as their learning, there is a case for embedding these interventions into the curriculum. For example, Winstone and Carless (2019) argue for the potential of combining the teaching of feedback literacy with core disciplinary content in a fusion of skills and conceptual development.

The present study aimed to identify whether feedback literacy is embedded within higher education frameworks as a key attribute expected of graduates. Since National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and subject-level benchmark statements (SBSs) provide guidance to universities about graduate or threshold outcomes, we drew on these documents to address the following questions:

1. To what extent are the components of feedback literacy (as represented in Carless & Boud's 2018 framework) present in the graduate or threshold outcomes of higher education NQFs across the world?
2. Are there disciplinary differences in how the components of feedback literacy are reflected in the graduate or threshold outcomes of higher education SBSs?

Methods

Sample

Using a stratified approach, we collated a sample of six NQFs from across the world and 24 SBSs from a range of disciplines. For RQ1, we obtained NQFs from one country in each continent (i.e. Australia, Hong Kong, Mexico, South Africa, UK and USA) to gain an international perspective on feedback literacy in higher education.

For RQ2, we categorised academic disciplines using the Becher-Biglan typology of hard-pure, hard-applied, soft-pure, and soft-applied (Becher, 1989). We then obtained six UK-based SBSs (published by the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] as part of their quality code for higher education in the UK) from within each category in this typology to ensure we sampled a representative range of subjects from across higher education.

Content analysis of documents

A coding scheme was developed based on Carless and Boud's (2018) feedback literacy framework, then all of the sampled NQFs and SBSs were entered into NVivo and independently coded by two of the authors for evidence of concepts pertaining to feedback literacy in graduate or threshold outcomes.

Findings

NQFs

Of the four dimensions of feedback literacy, only 'Managing Affect' (1 of the 6 countries) and 'Making Judgements' (5 of the 6 countries) were identified as named outcomes in the NQFs. For example, the South African NQF Level Descriptors discussed as an outcome students' capacity to "*evaluate and address his or her learning needs*" ('Making judgements'). 'Appreciating Feedback' and 'Taking Action' dimensions were not identified in any sampled NQFs.

SBSs

All four dimensions of feedback literacy were present in the sampled SBSs. 'Making Judgements' was coded most frequently, with 'Appreciating Feedback' being coded least frequently (see Table 1). Example statements include:

> **Appreciating Feedback:** *"appreciate the benefit of giving and receiving feedback"* (English, Soft Pure)
>
> **Managing Affect:** *"receive constructive criticism"* (Dentistry, Hard Applied)
>
> **Making Judgements:** *"be critically aware of their practical skill level in order to deliver the expected standards of paramedic care"* (Paramedics, Soft Applied)
>
> **Taking Action:** *"make effective use of feedback"* (Law, Soft Applied)

The frequencies did not differ significantly by discipline category, $\chi^2(3) = 3.4$, $p = .33$. However, trends in the frequencies suggest that indicators of feedback literacy were most frequently identified in the SBSs for 'applied' disciplines than 'pure' disciplines.

Table 1. Number of SBSs identifying each dimension of feedback literacy, by discipline category

	Appreciating Feedback	Managing Affect	Making Judgements	Taking Action	TOTAL	% Deviation	Standardised Residuals
Hard Pure	0	2	4	0	6	-40	-1.26
Hard Applied	0	4	10	0	14	+40	+1.26
Soft Pure	1	1	6	1	9	-10	-0.32
Soft Applied	0	3	7	1	11	+10	+0.32
TOTAL	1	10	27	2			

Discussion

Whilst some dimensions of feedback literacy were identified as important outcomes in NQFs and SBSs, some critical dimensions of feedback literacy (i.e. appreciating the purpose of feedback and taking action on feedback) are barely present as important outcomes of higher education, despite the critical nature of these skills for employment and lifelong learning. This also goes against the 'new paradigm' notion that feedback should be something that needs to be used by students to improve their work (Carless, 2015). Furthermore, whilst components of feedback literacy appear to be more prominent in SBSs for disciplines in which graduates are likely to draw on feedback in their future careers (e.g. applied disciplines such as law and dentistry), there are many examples in 'pure' domains where feedback plays an important role (e.g. social influence and group relations in psychology). Thus, the current findings highlight a need for integrating more aspects of feedback literacy into 'pure' disciplinary curricula and finding ways for encouraging students to appreciate feedback in all its forms whilst taking action in order to realise the impact of feedback on learning.

References

Becher, T. (1989). *Academic tribes and territories*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Carless, D. (2015). *Excellence in University Assessment.* London: Routledge.

Carless, D., & Boud, D. (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *43*(8), 1315–1325.

Värlander, S. (2008). The role of students' emotions in formal feedback situations. *Teaching in Higher Education, 13*, 145-156.

Winstone, N., & Carless, D. (2019). *Designing effective feedback processes in higher education: A learning-focused approach.* London: Routledge.

Winstone, N., Mathlin, G., & Nash, R. (2019). Building feedback literacy; Students' perceptions of the Developing Engagement with Feedback Toolkit. *Frontiers in Education.*