
Student Views of Assessment and Feedback

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Abstract

Assessment and feedback have long been recognised as crucial aspects of the student learning experience and occupy much effort on the part of students and tutors alike. The inception of the National Student Survey has exposed the extent to which students are dissatisfied with assessment and feedback. This paper reports the findings of a major institution-wide survey into students' perceptions and experience of assessment and feedback. Much research on assessment is discipline-specific, but this study surveyed students from all four typical typologies of university subjects: hard or soft, pure or applied. The findings revealed very little difference between students in terms of what they want from assessment and feedback. Indeed, not only were there few apparent connections between discipline and preference for feedback or assessment style, but this seemed to be unrelated to features such as age, mode of study or level of study. Regardless of any of these factors, students universally preferred timely one-to-one feedback.

Assessment and feedback is consistently identified as problematic for students across Higher Education (Unistats 2010). Liverpool John Moores University is no exception to this and in common with many universities, it is experiencing increasing attrition rates, particularly in the first year. There is often a supposition that better feedback will improve student performance and reduce drop-out (Bloxham & Boyd 2007), even though not all studies confirm this (Crisp 2007). Furthermore, it is assumed that improvements in assessment and feedback will enhance student satisfaction. In consequence, reviewing and revising management of assessment and feedback has become an institutional priority for many universities. However, the development of strategies to feedback mechanisms that are valued by students demands greater understanding of what students want and expect.

Although the National Student Survey has become the barometer for student perceptions of feedback, its findings are limited by the narrow scope of the questions asked. It does not, for example, gauge perceptions of different types of feedback. Indeed, as Poulas and Mahoney (2008)

suggest, there is a relative paucity in research focussing on students' perceptions of feedback, though more is emerging (see, for example, Brown 2007). Research on students' perceptions of feedback is often focussed on a qualitative analysis of a relatively small number of students (see for example Higgins et al. 2002). This, predictably, raises questions regarding the applicability of key findings across the sector. Moreover, studies often relate to specific disciplines (see for example Hounsel et al. 2008), with inevitable reservations regarding the value of this for other subject areas. What appears to be lacking is a wholesale study that crosses disciplinary boundaries. This could reveal useful insights into any commonality of students' perspectives and experiences, as well as identifying areas of divergence. The value of this for the development of any institutional policies is that it will expose those areas where best practice should be shared and those where local solutions are required. In light of this, this paper reports the findings of an institution-wide survey of students' views and experiences of assessment and feedback.

Method

To facilitate a study involving several subject areas, a research framework was required that could access the experiences of a large number of students. For analysis to be generalisable to the whole undergraduate population, it had to compare findings from students in different disciplines. This required a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis. Essentially, quantitative research uses mathematical models to explain the relationship between the areas of investigation (Bryman & Cramer 1990). Fundamental to this is the capacity to measure the phenomena under examination. This requires a reductive perspective on issues that offers breadth of study, with limited depth. Hence, researcher(s) can present broad-brush views that are relevant to similar populations, but lack the detail and subtlety associated with qualitative research (Robson 2002).

The method used in this study was survey by self-completed questionnaire. Surveys are frequently used in education; from evaluation of a single educational event to extensive, national surveys. Questionnaires comprise of a series of highly structured questions relating to the area of inquiry. There are two types of question: open-ended and closed. The difference between these relates to the latitude given to the respondents to frame their answers. Open-ended questions expect respondents to formulate their own answers. Conversely, closed questions limit response to selection from pre-defined answers. The advantage of closed questions is that they are easier to code and analyse, but may frustrate respondent if the answers do not match their experience. Open questions reduce the likelihood of this, but there is a danger of confusion and error in coding (Fink 2003). Furthermore, Czaja and Blair (2005) suggest that the effort of constructing answers may discourage those who are ambivalent about issues, resulting in data that overestimates more polarised views.

The quality of the questionnaire will determine validity. This refers to the extent to which researchers are confident that the instrument measures what it claims to measure and requires careful design and testing of the instrument prior to distribution (Fink 2003). In terms of design, questions and possible responses must be unambiguous. This is especially relevant for self-completed surveys as the respondent has no options for clarification (Fink 2003). Self-completion surveys allow for anonymity, minimise the researcher's influence on the respondent and encourage honesty. However, they are harder to monitor and can lower response rates (Czaja & Blair 2005). Traditionally, high response rates legitimise research findings. This is based on the assumption individuals who have strong opinions about the subject matter are more likely to respond. Hence, the higher the proportion respondents, the more likely the data will reflect general rather than exceptional views.

The questionnaire in this study used simple, closed questions to collect information on student characteristics and Likert scales to measure their attitudes to assessments. The latter offers a classic method for measuring attitudes (Robson 2002). Wherever appropriate, the questionnaire used positively worded statements rated on a five point scale. The university has adopted this 'house style' for surveys to replicate the National Student Survey (NSS 2010), so students will be familiar with the technique. To ensure validity, questions were developed through consultation with tutors and piloted with students.

Ethics

The study was granted ethical approval in acknowledgment of the fact that the research area was not contentious and nor were respondents vulnerable. However, in recognition of the power imbalance between

students and staff, every effort was made to remind respondents that the survey was anonymous and there was no compulsion for students to complete.

Sample and distribution

The population for this study was undergraduate students. To ensure wide representation, a sample was selected to reflect Becher and Trowler's (2001) four categories of university disciplines: hard and soft, pure and applied. The subjects chosen were Law, Nursing, History & Politics and Biological Sciences. All levels of study were included in the sampling framework, which followed a convenience model (see Robson 2002) relating to available classes at the time of the survey. The survey was conducted late in semester two. This meant that Level 1 students would have received feedback from their first semester's assessments and would be eligible for the survey. Questionnaires were distributed in lectures and students were given time in the class to complete them.

This distribution method was chosen to encourage a high response rate, as leaving respondents to complete surveys in their own time may lower returns (Groves 2006). Unfortunately, the university has no data on attendance, so an accurate response rate could not be determined. However, comparison between headcounts and returned questionnaires suggested about nine in 10 students responded.

Data management and analysis

To guarantee accuracy, all data was double-entered onto an excel spreadsheet, which was imported into SPSS for analysis (see Bryman & Cramer 1990). Significant associations between variables were established using chi-squared tests for nominal data and analysis of variance for ordinal data. For the purposes of this analysis, likert scales were judged as ordinal data. However, in some instances, the five point scale

was collapsed into two points ('agree' and 'neutral/disagree') to enable the results to be analysed as nominal data.

Results

1409 questionnaires were returned and, unless indicated, this is the base number for all the following data. There were no 'spoilt' questionnaires.

Sample characteristics

The survey sought basic information about the respondents. The vast majority of students were full-time (95.7%), with under a fifth (16.9%) being over 24 years old. All four subject areas were represented, as indicated in Table 1. The comparative difference in representation reflects variation in cohort size.

Subject	<i>n</i>	%
Biological Sciences	456	32.4
Social Sciences	363	25.8
Law	312	22.1
Nursing	268	19.0

Table 1 Subject studied by respondent (*n*=1399)

Table 2 indicates that all levels of undergraduate study were represented, with a slight bias towards Level 1. The sample included diploma students on a three year programme, so some Level 1 students would be in the second year of their programme.

Level	<i>n</i>	%
1	579	41.1
2	403	28.6
3	381	27.0

Table 2 Respondent's level of study (*n*=1363)

Respondents' experience of receiving feedback

Students were asked how many pieces of assessed work they were expected to submit per semester. Figure 1 shows that most students' workloads fell between three and eight pieces of work. This is consistent with the University's usual course structure of five modules per semester.

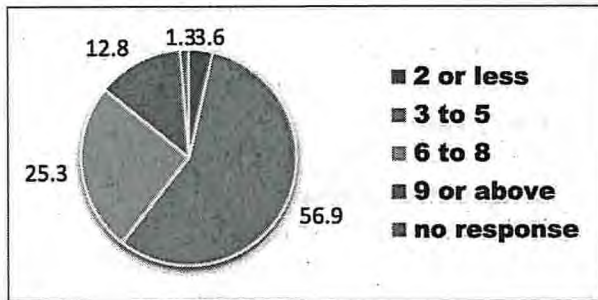


Figure 1 Pieces of assessed work per semester

The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the typical time from submission to the return of coursework, and to state what they saw as reasonable period of time. Figure 2 compares their experience with their expectation.

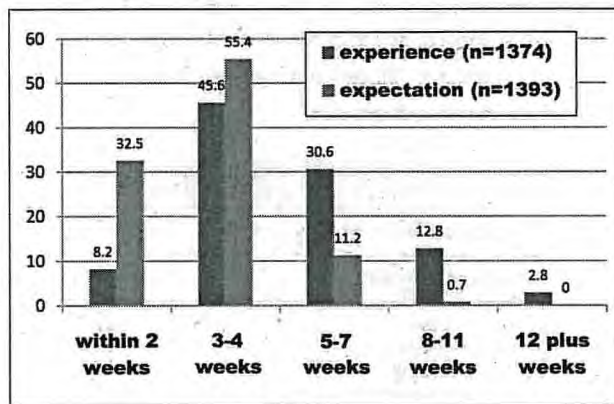


Figure 2 Return of coursework; comparison of students' experience and expectation

It appears that students usually wait longer to receive work back than they would expect. Further analysis suggested that Biological Sciences students wanted their feedback more quickly than other students ($\chi^2(3) = 208.337, p < 0.001$), although there was no difference in terms of when work was actually returned.

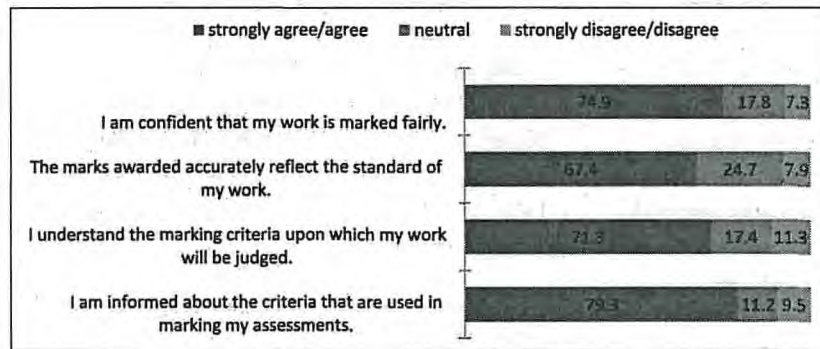


Figure 3.1 Student views on feedback: criteria and standards

Student views on feedback

Students were asked to rate statements regarding various aspects of feedback (see Figure 3.1). They generally appeared to feel well informed and confident in the marking process. However, a third of students appeared to question whether their marks rewarded their efforts. A significant minority appeared to be unsure as to whether they had been informed about assessment criteria and the study group was less sure again as to whether they understood those criteria.

Figure 3.2 indicates how students rated the style and value of feedback. Nearly half doubted to some extent whether feedback had helped them improve their performance and this finding concurs with previous studies (Brown 2007). However, the data suggests possible conflict in students' perceptions. Eight in 10 students claimed verbal feedback was as important as written feedback, implying a holistic view of feedback. Yet, around two thirds also felt that the final mark was the most important aspect of feedback, indicative of a more instrumental outlook. This is coherent with other data that indicated that in most cases (70.1%) feedback was received at the same time that the marked work was returned, with only 2.5% of students suggesting that they received feedback before the work was returned. Marks and feedback appear to be inexorably linked.

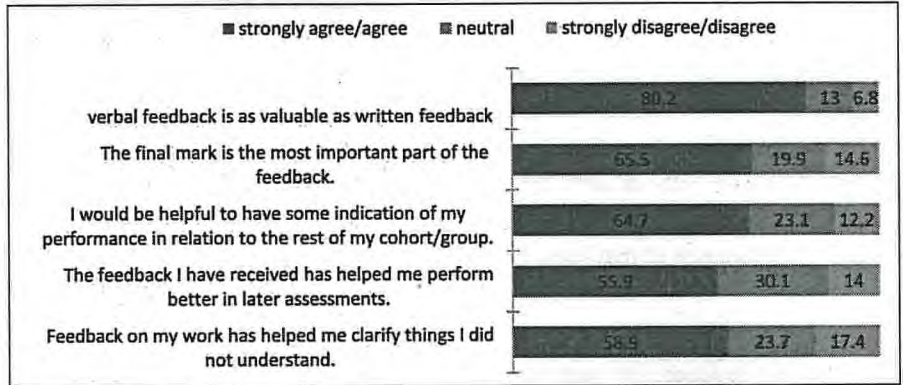


Figure 3.2 Student views on feedback: style and value

Assessment distribution appeared to be the most potentially problematic area (as indicated in Figure 3.3), as over a third judged it to be unevenly distributed across the semester.

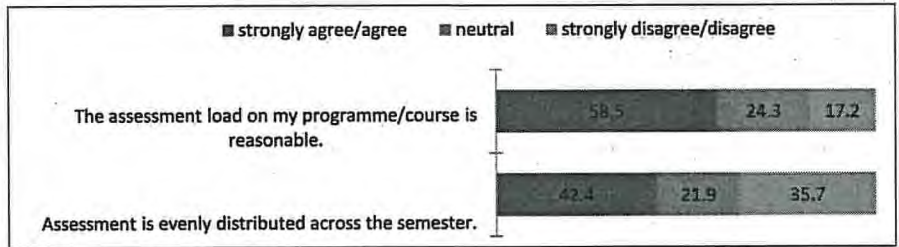


Figure 3.3 Student views on feedback: assessment load

More detailed analysis indicated that views on feedback were remarkably consistent, regardless of the subject, level of study, mode of study or age. However, there were significant differences in their views of assessment distribution, with nursing students significantly more likely than other students to judge their workload as unevenly distributed ($\chi^2 (3) = 58.805, p < 0.001$).

The questionnaire included a statement "I collect marked work as soon as it is available" to assess the value that students ascribed to prompt collection of marked coursework. Under 1 in 20 (4.3%) disagreed with this statement, with 41.9% strongly agreeing. This could be indicative of engagement

and analysis assessed whether variation was associated with perceptions of feedback. Analysis of variance demonstrated a relationship between course work collection and students' understanding of, and trust in, the assessment process. The more students agreed with the statement, the more likely they were to understand assessment criteria ($p < 0.0001$), be informed about the criteria ($p < 0.001$) and believe that their marks accurately reflect the standard of their work ($p < 0.0001$).

Finally, respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of a range of feedback methods. The ranking below indicates the relative preference they had for these methods, with the bracketed figure being the proportion of respondents who claimed no experience of that form of feedback.

1. One-to-one discussion with module staff	(3.6)
2. One-to-one discussion with personal tutor	(5.0)
3. Written comments on feedback sheet	(0.4)
4. Annotations on scripts	(0.6)
5. Individual email with specific comments	(7.7)
6. General feedback to whole class	(2.3)
7. Feedback in work placements	(18.3)
8. Group email with general comments	(8.6)
9. Tick-box assessment sheets	(4.3)
10. Feedback from other students	(16.5)

This suggests that students' preference lies with personalised feedback that offers a commentary on their work, a finding which concurs with some previous studies (Poulas & Mahoney 2007) but not others (Knight & Yorke 2003). There is also a marked difference in familiarity with different types of feedback, with placement and peer feedback being less well-known to students than other forms. Perceived value of feedback was the area that revealed most difference between students across the university. Science students were significantly less likely than other students to rate to personal discussion with module staff ($\chi^2(3) = 33.148, p < 0.001$) or personal tutors ($\chi^2(3) = 30.138, p < 0.001$). Conversely, nursing students rated feedback in work placements ($\chi^2(3) = 139.387, p < 0.001$) and feedback from peers ($\chi^2(3) = 47.463, p < 0.001$) as more useful than their peers did.

Discussion

This survey offers a useful insight into how students perceive assessment and feedback. The research design focus on representation and maximising response has generated data that should be transferable to other subjects and other universities although it is, perhaps, arguable that the findings may be more applicable to the post-1992 sector with a similar constituency of students. Key to this is the design of the survey tool, which a combination of high response rate and little missing data, suggests students found relevant and comprehensible (Czaja & Blair 2005). However, there are some restrictions to this study that are worth consideration. One limitation is that data might reflect how students thought they should respond rather than what they actually believed. Data on collection of course work reflects this. Less than 5% of this sample indicated that they didn't collect their coursework promptly. Yet, anecdotal evidence from tutors and administrators from across the institution suggests that approximately one third of all coursework is routinely uncollected. Duncan

(2007 p.271) confers stating that '*many of our students show little interest in the written and oral advice offered to them by the markers... a substantial number do not even bother to collect their work once it has been assessed, preferring to receive their grades by notification from exam boards*'. It is possible that the students surveyed were not fully representative of the student population. Distribution relied on students being available in their classes. Arguably, attendance may relate to satisfaction, capacity or engagement - all of which could influence response. Hence, this analysis might over-estimate engagement and the voice of the uninterested or unimpressed will be missing. However, it would be difficult to conceive of a research design that would include these groups as they are naturally hard to reach.

The data suggest a reasonable level of satisfaction with assessment and feedback process. It does not paint an entirely positive picture but does appear to present one that is marginally better to that found in the National Student Survey. This might be a consequence of the use of positively worded statements in the questionnaire. While consistent with the National Student Survey, they might discourage criticism and Czaja and Blair (2005) argue that questionnaire should include a balance of positive and negative statements. Interestingly, students in this survey appear to be more content with assessment and feedback than the institution's National Student Survey data suggests (Unistats 2010). There are three possible reasons for this. The first is that students feel less comfortable expressing dissatisfaction on a survey carried by, and within, their own institution. Despite reassurances that responses were anonymous, the more dislocated nature of the National Student Survey might encourage greater honesty. Conversely, the response rate in this study is much higher than the 60 or so percent recorded for the National Student Survey (Unistats 2010). In light of this, it is conceivable that the lower response rate

inflates the negative perceptions of disgruntled students. In addition, the National Student Survey analyses only third year responses whereas this study was conducted across all three levels. It seems reasonable to surmise that as students approach completion they will become more anxious about assessment, and that this might be reflected in lower satisfaction.

Students in this survey appear fairly conservative in their outlook. Innovative methods, such as group feedback or peer review, are less well received than traditional techniques. The data suggests that students want personalised feedback that offers some discussion of their work. Presumably, the reason for this is that students want to know what they have done right and where they need to improve. Sadly, despite the undoubted efforts of tutors, this is not always provided. Agreement was lowest with the feed-forward element reflected in the question '*the feedback I have received has helped me perform better in later assignments*' (Figure 3.2). Nearly half the students in this study did not feel that feedback had helped them to improve future performance. Perhaps the reason for this is that students and tutors conceptualise feedback differently. Students may view feedback as a response to their individual effort and part of an ongoing dialogue about their work. On the other hand, tutors may take a group-focus, with feedback being the conclusion of their role in that group of students' assessment experiences.

One particularly interesting outcome from this research is the remarkable lack of difference between students regarding their experiences or perceptions. It is worth noting that age and mode of study were not factors. However, more significant is the limited divergence of opinion across subject areas. Given the diversity in the disciplines surveyed, far more difference might be expected. In the absence of this, it

seems reasonable to conclude that student experience of assessment is a fairly universal experience. Those distinctions that were exposed can be explained within the parameters of the subject. It would be easy to make lazy assumptions about supposedly 'introverted' science students being less enamoured with one-to-one discussions than their 'extrovert' peers in soft or applied subjects. Yet, science students receive a lot of individualised attention in laboratory work or fieldtrips. Perhaps, therefore, they attribute less value to formalised meetings. Likewise, nursing students spend a significant proportion of their time in practice and so their greater preference for work placement feedback is inevitable. Similarly, their greater interest in peer evaluation is consistent with the notions of mentorship that are established practices within their discipline.

Conclusion

The data indicates a number of areas where action can be taken to enhance student perception of assessment and feedback which is not dependent upon the discipline being studied. Some of these focus on considering how students engage with the process. Facilitating understanding of criteria is a simple step, but the relationship between this and engagement suggests that it may reinforce the student's sense of responsibility for his or her work and make the collection of feedback more likely.

This study indicates an overall student preference for one-to-one feedback as the best form of feedback in some discipline areas. Given the resource implications associated with this, such methods need to be carefully handled at the programme level to manage students' expectations from the start of the course of study. A greater awareness of the marking process will help students to understand what happens to their work after submission. Being conscious of marking loads, moderation

processes and external examination might make students more sympathetic to what they apparently see as an unacceptably long period between submission and the return of work. However, it is worth bearing in mind that previous studies have shown the importance of timely feedback (Race 1995). Hence, a balance needs to be achieved between the time required for necessary marking procedures and the provision of feedback.

Further research would be useful to investigate whether the findings of this study are applicable across the university sector, or whether they apply best to the constituency of students found in large, metropolitan post-1992 institutions. There is also scope for investigation of how improved communication regarding the assessment processes, enhances student confidence and satisfaction. In terms of feedback method, the analysis suggests that some consideration should be given to how feedback mechanisms relate to the normal traditions of the discipline, but that the importance of this should not be overemphasised. Perhaps more important, tutors should resist innovation for the sake of innovation. This is particularly germane at a time when novel methods of feedback are seen as ways of managing increasing workloads. Whatever method is chosen, this research indicates that feedback should offer all students individualised commentary on their work to enable future improvement.

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