

Assessment feedback to students

This guidance paper offers:

1. The principles of providing feedback to students
2. A listing of practical feedback methods for both coursework and exams
3. Suggestions for cutting back on marking and feedback work load
4. The main points of Bath's Quality Assurance expectations regarding assessment feedback to students
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1. The principles of providing assessment feedback to students

The role of feedback in the learning process, is to inform the student of where and how their learning and performance can be improved. Feedback on learning can come from fellow students, lecturers, staff supporting the learning process such as demonstrators, or the student themselves.

Although feedback to students is often thought of as being given in response to assessment, there are many forms of feedback on learning, which do not relate to assessment at all, ranging from feedback on work in progress (eg during lab work) to more generic feedback on effective a student is performing their studies overall (end of year study advice). This paper, however, concentrates on providing feedback on assessment, both coursework and exams.

Feedback on assessment can be given to sum up the final judgement of the quality of the students work (**summative** feedback), or to help the student improve their work in future (**formative** feedback). A further, but in HE less common form of feedback helps the student identify their aptitude and ability for a particular kind of learning (**diagnostic** feedback). A highly individualised form of feedback sometimes used in (performing) arts, sports, design and professional disciplines takes into account the students' previous developments, and uses this as the starting point for assessing progress or improvement of skills, knowledge and competence (**ipsative** feedback).

Considering best practice of providing feedback to students, the following values apply:

- Feedback is best provided as soon as possible after the assessment took place, so that the learning from feedback can still be connected to the assessment content.
- Feedback should be critical, but supportive to learning, so as to encourage a student's confident scrutiny of their future work.
- Feedback should –where possible- be directly related to learning outcomes and given assessment criteria, so that students are very clear on what was and will be expected of them.
- Feedback on work should go beyond editing (grammar, spelling, mathematical notation, presentation) and link to the broader learning outcomes, unless of course, these are included in the learning outcomes. Common editing type feedback can be given through usage of a feedback tick list (see below)
- Feedback should be given with care and attention to standards of respect for diversity and individuality, and should rarely be directed at the student, but rather at their work.

- Feedback is most likely to have an effect if students are fully aware that what they encounter is meant as feedback, and that they should take note of it in order to improve their learning.

2. A listing of practical feedback methods

The most common forms we tend to use in Higher Education for giving feedback is written feedback on students' individual work, or verbal feedback either to individuals or groups of students. But work load pressure, innovative means of assessment, direct student demands and a range of other pressures, can lead to a need to use less traditional modes of feedback.

- Providing **generic feedback** in lectures or workshops: feedback is given on what the majority of students seem to be struggling with, without reference to individual assessments.
- **Self assessment**: allow students to provide an initial self assessment at the end of their assessed work, according to a set grid or checklist of assessment criteria. This helps students in the fastest possible manner, to have an indication of the quality of their achievement.
- **Student steered feedback**: the student is asked at the end of their assessment to put forward a request for feedback on a particular part of their learning. This is one of the strongest means to make a student evaluate their own progress, and allows the assessor to target a student's concerns most precisely.
- **Feedback statement banks**: collate a structured listing of carefully phrased feedback remarks you most often use for a particular assessment. You can then use it alongside your marking for each piece of assessed work. When marking, simply cross reference to the relevant feedback comment, or use a fixed coding system and give the student the marked up feedback statement list along with the marked work. Ideally, your feedback statement listing also leaves space for individual feedback.

Introducing feedback statement banks are a prime opportunity to improve the quality of feedback, by commenting on how improvements can be made regarding the issue for which the student is being marked down.

- **Electronic feedback** can combine the benefit of speedy feedback returns, with the advantages using feedback statement banks, which list standard feedback given to common mistakes (tackling repeated feedback on, say, grammar problems or notational mistakes)
- **Class marking**: collate parts of actual student work, to let students themselves mark and provide feedback on an assessment they have in fact, all handed in. Question by question, the collated work could for instance consist of an example of a great answer, and an example of problematic answer to the same question.
- **Peer marking and feedback**: provide clear assessment criteria and possibly model answers to students, and ask students to mark each other's (anonymous) work and provide full written feedback. This not only helps the person receiving the feedback, but also moves the learning from the assessing student, to a higher level. Be prepared to find that students mark each other much 'tougher' than you might ever consider, so do remind them of the need to mark the work, not the student and to be respectful and careful of each other.
- **Individual verbal feedback**: most suitable for thesis type assessed work, such as PhD progress feedback, or feedback on project work. In many ways, this is the individual tutorial on which University learning once used to depend.

- **Grouped needs-led feedback:** students are grouped by their need for feedback on particular content or learning. Feedback is then delivered to those students who all struggled with the same problems as a group. Students may find themselves in more groups than one, and may self select or be selected for particular groups. This method is particularly suitable for feedback on complex learning and content.
- **Marking schemes:** using a checklist of assessment criteria, onto which the feedback to students is written, allows students to receive their feedback in a very structured manner. A blank comment box should always be added to marking scheme forms, so as to allow for individual feedback where needed.
- **Co-grading:** one of the best kinds of feedback and the most direct form possible. The student and the assessor mark the work together, so that feedback and explanation of marking decisions are given immediately. In Arts subjects, the assessment method of the 'Critique' is often used, which –if verbal- can take the form of co-grading.
- **On line feedback conferences:** by providing a generic form of feedback online (a number of options are mentioned above), student can be enabled to discuss further solutions to the learning problems they have encountered. The considerable advantage is that students can return to their peer feedback discussions at a later stage. Such techniques work well when developing intellectual discipline skills (programming, lab work, design drawing etc)

Which type of feedback is chosen, depends on a number of factors.

Some types of feedback fit better with specific types of assessment than others. Peer, self, grouped needs feedback, co-marking and class marking are likely to be more appropriate for formative assessments, whilst marking schemes, feedback statement banks and individual verbal feedback are more commonly –but not exclusively- associated with summative feedback.

Often there is value in using different feedback (or indeed assessment-) methods throughout the learning experience of a student. It may benefit the student to consider the improvement of their learning from different angles, provided by different forms of feedback.

Another factor is workload of students and staff, and some approaches to deal with that aspect are set out below.

3. Suggestions for cutting back on marking and feedback work load

- Provide a set of **model answers**, annotated with comments on why these answers are excellent, and comments on common mistakes made. Refer to these in individual feedback you provide to students.
- Use **feedback statement banks or reports** (see above).
- Introduce **marking schemes** (see above) or assignment return sheets, as they are sometimes called. Assessors will be front loading some of the work by having to make the marking scheme, but saving much precious time when marking to a deadline. Combined with the use of a feedback statement bank, this can speed up marking and feedback provision tremendously, but this carries the risk of impersonal feedback.
- Use **in-class feedback** to the whole group of students, thereby providing feedback on common problems. This should only be used for *part* of a unit or programme's overall assessment.
- Consider the use **peer (marking and) feedback**

- The regulations permit you to use **graduate teaching assistants** to have a role in assessment in year 1. There are no restrictions in using them to provide feedback to students in any year.
- Allow students to **self-mark parts of early 'in flight' (formative) assessments**, but inform the student in advance that you will sample-mark some of the assessments. You will find that students are likely to be more strict with themselves than you might be.
- **Self assessing during a summative assessment:** using the principles of self assessment, you invite students to self assess their work before handing it in. You will then still need to assess the work, but you will find it works a lot faster, whilst student have already benefited from direct feedback and reflection
- Work with colleagues on introducing Bath's **Personal Development Planning system**, to support students self-assessing their overall learning progress.
- Contact the University of Bath's E-Learning team, who may be able to help you set up **electronic assessment and feedback mechanisms**.

Clearly, with all these suggestions, a balance needs to be considered between saving time so as to work within deadlines, and maintaining the quality of feedback given to students.

4. The main points of Bath's Quality Assurance expectations regarding assessment feedback to students i.e. the mandatory standards for feedback

The agreements on providing feedback include the expectation of feedback being prompt: feedback should be provided within three weeks on student work submitted on time.

The feedback method should be consistent with the nature of the assessed work. Feedback should relate to the assessment criteria, but also relate to generic skills development and general academic standards.

Where group work is being assessed, particular rules apply regarding marking and providing feedback, reflecting the need for individual grading and learning from feedback.

Formal written feedback (often the student transcript) should be supported by the opportunity to discuss performance with a Personal Tutor.

Students should receive periodic feedback on their overall performance (across and beyond units)

Please note that the above are not the precise QA standards for providing feedback. Refer to QA16 in the QA manual <http://internal.bath.ac.uk/quality> for the full definitions.

5. References for further information

Brown, S., Rust, C., & Gibbs, G. (1994) Strategies for diversifying assessment in higher education, Oxford, Oxford Centre for Staff Development

Rust, C., Price, M. and O'Donovan, B. (2003). Improving students' learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. **28** (2), 147-164.

Sadler, D.R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*. **18**, 119-144.

A practical guide for academic staff on providing feedback can be found on <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/institute/info/quality/feedback.pdf>

An excellent online guidance document on assessment and feedback can be found on the Social Work and Social policy Subject Centre Network website: <http://www.swap.ac.uk/learning/assessment.asp> Although the website suggests it is subject specific, there is a lot on offer for colleagues from across disciplines.

Other links can be found through the website of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Office: www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching

Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback - SENLEF
The SENLEF project is a resource for practitioners wishing to improve their feedback practice or get some exciting new ideas <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/senlef.htm>

We would like to provide links from the LTEO pages to good practice in giving feedback to students, as it features in your department. Please get in touch if there are materials or reports we can link to, that you think may be of interest to colleagues

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