

Student experiences of assessment feedback in the geography subject area: insights from a post-1992 institution

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Abstract

Across the Higher Education sector students typically express dissatisfaction in assessment and feedback processes. This is concerning due to the importance of assessment feedback for helping promote good student outcomes. In this study the perceptions of 47 students were captured in focus groups to explore the challenges students face when receiving assessment feedback. The findings document a broad range of opinions held by students on the provision and effectiveness of feedback within the geography subject area, with preferences for feedback style and approach varying at the individual level. The findings indicate that poor assessment literacy limits the application of tutor feedback between separate assessment points. The language used by tutors when providing feedback was commented on. This relates to both the affective response of students to tutor feedback and their ability to de-code tutor comments. We underline the importance of building students' assessment literacy to ensure they are able to fully benefit from both formative and summative feedback opportunities.

Keywords

Effective feedback, summative, formative, analytical rubrics, student satisfaction

Research Context

Feedback is an interface between tutors and students, representing an important opportunity for educators to shape goals for individual learners, and for students to have their learning needs met (Bailey and Garner, 2010). Unsurprisingly, students learn faster and more effectively when they have a clear sense of how to improve their academic performance (Hounsell, 2003; Carless, 2006; Vardi, 2012). Despite the obvious importance of feedback, at present poor student satisfaction in feedback approaches across the sector are reflected in the United Kingdom's National Student Survey (NSS). Students may be unhappy with written feedback in relation to its detail, clarity, and delivery time (Nicol, 2010). Recent research has identified that students value, amongst other aspects, detailed and personalised feedback (Dawson et al., 2018) and Advance HE highlights the need for students to understand assessment procedures ('assessment literacy'), which may play a role in helping students independently manage their learning (Jackel et al., 2017). Linked to this, grading rubrics are suggested to play a role in facilitating student assessment literacy and Smith et al. (2013) demonstrate that through improving the assessment literacy of a set of learners, one can enhance levels of attainment. Despite these advances in our understanding of what constitutes effective feedback, issues around the 'entanglement' between assessment, grading, and effectiveness of feedback have been noted and explored in a recent study by Winstone and Boud (2022).

Multiple studies have noted the role of learner emotions in explaining why feedback may or may not be acted on or well received (e.g., Evans, 2013; Pitt and Norton, 2017). Pitt et al. (2020) highlight the need to cultivate learning environments that provide frequent and regular opportunities for students to receive feedback in 'low stakes' situations, and the value of using praise to promote a growth-mind set. The value in developing student agency and independence, as a means to ensure feedback has the intended learning payoff was noted in a study of geography students at King's College London – a Russell group institution with a high proportion of international students

(Francis et al., 2019). However, other studies have drawn attention to the experiences of 'non-traditional' students in Higher Education (e.g., Hoskins, 2012; Gill, 2020). Critically, within the geography subject area, there has been limited exploration of feedback experiences in this context.

Therefore, this study set out to identify how geography students read and use feedback within the context of a post-1992 institution where many entrants are from a 'non-traditional' background. This provides a timely comparison to existing published work, which documents geography student experiences of feedback within the context of a Russell Group institution (e.g. Francis et al., 2019), therefore offering an opportunity to explore differences and similarities of undergraduate geographers in different educational contexts. The objectives of this work were to explore, in the local context of a post-1992 geography subject area: (i) students understanding of operational feedback terminology; (ii) student expectations for assessment feedback such as their perspective on the use of rubrics; and (iii) strategies for providing feedback that enhance student experience and maximise learning pay-off.

Methods

The focus groups ($n = 7$) lasted between 39 to 56 minutes (average = 46 minutes) and involved between four and nine participants (47 student participants in total) (Table 1). Focus groups were used as a non-quantitative exploratory approach to capture the opinions and perceptions of the participants (Cope, 2010). All focus groups were conducted at the University of Derby's Kedleston Road campus. To ensure inclusion all students from Geographical Sciences were invited to participate in this project and participation was voluntary. Participants were recruited via emails sent from programme and module leaders. There was no financial incentive for participating in the focus groups. The participants represent a range of genders, nationalities, and backgrounds. In relation to the latter, the University of Derby is known for its widening participation mission, providing

opportunities to a considerable proportion of students from a low socioeconomic background (Mutton and Plowden, 2016).

At the University of Derby, where the study was undertaken, teaching is operated under a two-semester format. Within each 20-credit module, typically students are assessed summatively at two points: a mid-semester assignment, and an end of semester assignment. Weighting of the assessments may vary within a module, and assessments are linked to specific learning outcomes. Student participants were registered on either the BSc (Hons) Geography programme, BSc (Hons) Geology programme, or BSc (Hons) Joint Honours programme (Geography, Geology, Environmental Hazards, and Global Development) (Table 1). Students were therefore given the opportunity to comment on assessment feedback, as they had experienced it, as related to multiple modules, tutors, and assessment types. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the College of Life and Natural Sciences ethics committee. On the day of the focus groups participants were asked to sign a consent form and were reminded of the aims of the project. In each focus group the moderator confirmed with participants that the focus group could be recorded in accordance with the Ethics Committee Regulations. All participants consented to the use of anonymised comments in any published research linked to the project. No participants withdrew their consent since the completion of the focus groups in 2018.

The themes discussed in the focus groups were derived from reviewing academic literature on assessment feedback (see research context). The following themes were discussed: (i) student understanding of feedback processes; (ii) the use of rubrics to structure summative feedback; and (iii) perceptions relating to the tone and language used by tutors when providing feedback. A series of prompts were used to guide the discussion when needed. During the focus groups, students were also presented with a series of Turnitin grading rubrics to prompt discussion. The focus groups were

transcribed verbatim by a third party and the data was analysed using NVIVO Pro (ver. 12).

Table 1: Focus group information

Focus group no.	No. of participants	Age		Gender		FHEQ Level	Course	Length of focus group (minutes)
		18 - 21 years old	>21 years old	m	f			
1	4	4	0	1	3	4	Geography	39
2	6	2	4	6	0	6	Global Development Joint Honours	46
3	7	6	1	2	5	5	Geography and Joint Honours	56
4	9	6	3	5	4	5	Geography and Joint Honours	49
5	7	5	2	2	5	5	Geography and Joint Honours	41
6	9	5	4	7	2	5	Geography and Joint Honours	38
7	6	5	0	3	3	4 - 6	Geology	49

This project used a thematic analysis approach to identify, analyse and report patterns within the data. Using a realist approach, the thematic analysis aimed to theorise motivations, experience and meaning in a simple way. A thematic analysis latent approach was selected as it examines the underlying ideas that are theorised, as shaping the interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researchers searched for themes and patterns across the entire data set consisting of seven focus groups. Using an inductive approach, the data were analysed using emic coding. That is, the researchers coded the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding framework or the researchers' pre-conceptions (Crang and Cook, 2007). Themes were identified according to their link to the research objectives and their prevalence within

the dataset. The thematic analysis followed the steps from Braun and Clarke (2006). To complete the analysis, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and writing down some initial ideas. Open coding was used to identify broad and simple codes from the text before streaming them off in the axial coding phase of the analysis. The axial coding phase focuses on the frequencies of the codes and the connection of the codes to organise them in a framework. In the final stage of the coding, selective coding narrowed the scope of the analysis and linked the codes to the themes relevant to the research questions (Bergin, 2018). The researchers reviewed the themes to ensure fit with the analysis and then generated clear definitions and names for each theme. From this, the researchers wrote up the report by selecting compelling extract examples and relating the analysis back to the research objectives and the literature.

Results and discussion

Overview

In this section, we present and consider a series of observations and extracts from the focus groups. Here we highlight differences in the understanding of assessment feedback from the students, as well as the multiple ways that students deal with feedback.

Assessment literacy

The analysis of the focus groups revealed that there was some confusion in our students' understanding of assessment feedback procedures. Overall, feedback was mainly associated with summative assessments (i.e., grade-bearing work). Many students understood that feedback is a way to improve their performance. Feedback was defined using terms like 'criticism', 'evaluation of work', 'strengths and weaknesses of work', 'constructive criticism'. The comments below illustrate the range of definitions used by respondents to define assessment feedback:

A form of support.

It's when you're given constructive criticism on your work so you can improve it.

It's a way of knowing what to do better and what you could improve on next time.

Knowing where you went wrong.

It's good because it helps you improve in anything, especially written work.

Students expressed an expectation that the feedback they receive should enable them to improve their attainment.

Feedback [for work] to be either made better or so you can improve on it

It's like from an exam or from a piece of coursework when you'll get critical analysis of it, and then you can improve from that feedback.

Half of the student focus group participants did not recognise the difference between formative and summative assessment and feedback.

I know what it is, but sometimes I get confused. How serious is this feedback? How serious is a formative piece of work?

Whether or not you can just submit a draft or whether it needs to be the final thing.

While some students confirmed they did not fully understand the term formative assessment and feedback, and those who did felt that formative assessments and the associated feedback are *more* important to them. Here participants acknowledge and value of formative assessment and feedback, but highlight challenges in engaging with additional assessment opportunities.

If it's formative, I try to apply it, to improve the work.

Yes, I'm the same. I always end up leaving it to the last minute so if there's a formative feedback thing I'll generally not get it in time for that so I'll miss out on the feedback really.

I think it helps you keep to the deadline because to get it you actually have to start your work in time.

Importantly, summative feedback appears to be perceived by *some* students to be of limited use. These findings highlight that summative feedback is not always used, valued, and put to use ('feedforward') to help improve future performance.

You've got the feedback for that piece of work but you can't apply that feedback to that work, because that's the end of it, that's the assessed piece of work that you've handed in and you've got the grade back for it. There's not really much else you can do about it.

But if it's summative, there's not really much you can do about it. You're like, 'Oh, nice, got good feedback,' and move onto the next thing.

I think I probably use formative feedback a lot more, because by the time another piece of work has come around, I think I've forgotten my comments on the summative bit.

An interesting finding of the study was that whilst students did not refer to formative assessment opportunities provided in-class. Despite this, the focus groups revealed that some students would value more formative feedback than summative feedback. The students' perception was that formative feedback was not always available for all modules, perhaps linked to students not always recognising 'formative feedback' when it is provided. A minority of students felt that formative feedback is a 'form of support', and suggested that formative feedback should be staggered throughout the delivery of a module.

Maybe, even if you could get formative feedback twice; once near the start, 'Have I started this right?' and then the middle, 'Have I improved?' And then the final, 'Look how far you've come.'

One of the findings from the analysis was that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to providing assessment feedback. Here, geography students value different types of feedback and interpret feedback in different ways according to their own experience and level of study.

I think a mix of both [verbal and written feedback] is probably good because, especially with essays, you get written feedback but then you can go see [the tutor] and have a discussion about it. And then you can either ask questions or then you can get different feedback because

they can then maybe pick up on things that they might not have picked up on first time round. So, you can get additional feedback as well as the written.

There appears to be some differences in student expectations for feedback by level of study. Specifically, our results highlight that first-year (FHEQ Level 4) student expectations for assessment feedback was influenced by their experiences during their GCSE and A-level studies (FHEQ Level 2 and 3), with students expressing a preference for a colour coded 'traffic light system' to help them to identify more easily what was done well and what needs attention. Whilst differences in the use of feedback between first, second- and third-year students was not this focus of our study, this warrants further investigation, and other work has identified challenges students face when initially transitioning into Higher Education (Gill, 2020).

Yes, using a colour, say a red mark, obviously red kind of symbolises that something is not good. But yes, red marks saying you need to do this, need to do that. A green mark is where there's a tick saying this is good so I can see where I've done well and then probably put that into other works.

Several participants admitted to not revisiting feedback. This was due to the perception that previously provided feedback is of limited value to them as future assessments are 'different'. Participants suggested that previous feedback does not apply to future assessed tasks.

No I don't. I never revisit, go back, either because I've lost it or [laugh]...or it doesn't really relate to something else that I'm doing.

I don't tend to go back and look at mine but that's only because mine tend to be like criticisms about structure or you

*need to explain this in more detail, so I remember to do that.
I still use it, but I don't have to refer back so much.*

*Well, I think one of the biggest areas I make, I think a lot of people... So say you get an essay on Turnitin and you do read through that feedback, you take it in, but then when you've got an essay the term after, does anyone actually go back and look at their old essay? Because I personally haven't because even though I read it at the time, you're not going to remember it so maybe that's a step you should take.
Personally, I don't really do that.*

I do when I get them and use it for the next essay but if I was starting a fresh essay I wouldn't go back and check, but I probably should have done that. But I still used the criticism, just didn't refer back.

Many issues emerging from these comments were also identified in a recent critical exploration of the entanglement between assessment and feedback by Winstone and Boud (2022). In Winstone and Boud's (2022) work the provision of feedback by tutors for 'Quality Assurance actors' rather than learners was suggested to detrimentally impact student attainment. These authors note that many forms of feedback 'can come too late to be of use' and this is also reflected in the experiences of the student participants surveyed here. In our study, the perspective that with summative assessment feedback little can be done with any developmental information provided by tutors was also identified.

Interestingly, issues linked to this were also identified by Francis et al. (2019) in their study on assessment feedback in a Russell group geography department, with certain students admitting to not revisiting and curating

their feedback. Francis et al. (2019) interpreted this perspective as evidence that certain students had adopted a 'passive consumer' orientation to their studies. That is, there was an expectation that tutors do this for them, rather than students being responsible for managing their own learning. These challenges are present in a range of institutions in the United Kingdom, with the issues noted not related solely to the situatedness of student experiences in any one type of institution (e.g., post-1992 and Russell Group). The influence of a student-as-consumer orientation on attainment and satisfaction in Higher Education has been noted in previous work (e.g., Bunce et al., 2017).

Many students admitted to having a focus on the grade, rather than the feedback when it comes to summative tasks; a point also raised by Winstone and Boud (2022). The above suggests that feedback is not revisited or curated by students and applied in subsequent assessments. Given the presence of these issues in the cohorts sampled in our study, we therefore support ongoing efforts to preserve the learning function of feedback, namely the six strategies suggested by Winstone and Boud (2022) to counter the issues also identified in this study.

Assessment literacy has been identified as being an important aspect of enabling students to become independent learners (Smith et al., 2013). For students to be assessment literate, an understanding of the principles, practices and terminology associated with assessment and feedback is required. Despite Advance HE (2013) (formerly the Higher Education Academy) encouraging the use of more meaningful formative assessment opportunities, it is alarming to note that students cannot appropriately define, and therefore most likely identify the formative feedback opportunities provided to them within the curriculum. Indeed, McLeod and Mortimer (2012) specifically focus on raising student awareness regarding assessment and feedback procedures to help build assessment literacy and manage student expectations. Other research indicates that students may not always fully understand the range of strategies used to provide feedback (i.e. the

formative/summative dichotomy), and how assessment feedback can be used to improve their academic performance (e.g. Dealey and Bovill, 2017).

Clearly a starting point for enabling students to fully benefit from any feedback provided would be to ensure they are appropriately briefed and understand key operational terminology. Student understanding of any grading terminology should be checked, and key ideas reinforced where required. As demonstrated here, one should not assume students come into Higher Education with a familiarity with the pedagogic terminology often used by tutors in assessment briefs and rubrics. Connected to this was the perspective that summative feedback is of limited use, due to future assessments being 'different', limiting the *perceived* relevance of any feedback provided. This is not strictly true, and Jackel et al., (2017: 8) indicate that whilst there is a significant focus on the formative/summative dichotomy "...all assessment is formative in some sense, while only some assessment is both formative and summative". However, the findings highlight that summative feedback is not always valued and put to use ('feedforward') to help improve future performance.

Rubrics and marking matrices

In the focus groups we questioned students about the use of rubrics delivered via Turnitin as a standard procedure for structuring feedback on assessed work. Our analysis revealed that students had mixed views on the use of rubrics, and this tended to vary between course and the detail of information provided on the rubric:

I feel integrated would be better, so don't just do positives or negatives, or negatives/positives, just do like 'you referenced well, however, you could have cited slightly better,' something like that, so it gives... It just flows better and you can go, okay, I did this well, I could have done this better, instead of you did this, this, this, this, this, you need to do

this, this, this, this, this. I think it would be more easy to understand I think

Yes, I think it's too vague.

I just don't like them. They're just far too vague

When presented with examples of Turnitin rubrics (a more holistic rubric vs. a more comprehensive analytical rubric) as an approach for structuring feedback, students disagreed on how to use these matrices. Some students suggested that they found the rubrics useful for understanding the grade awarded. Others thought that grids were useful for helping them prepare their work. Critically, the language used in the rubric was an issue for some students:

I don't think I'd like this. I think if I was given it, I'd probably just put it to the side, because I wouldn't understand it well enough for it to be feedback. I need someone to write down what I've done wrong, and what needs to be improved, whereas this is just too vague. Some of them are just, 'largely free of gross errors,' it's not relevant enough to what I've done, for me, anyway.

Rubrics have been the subject of extensive pedagogic research, with several scholars noting that they are an 'efficient' tool for marking (Moskal, 2000; Leydens and Santi, 2006; Brodie and Gibbings, 2009). Leyden and Santi (2006) evaluate the use of rubrics within a geoscientific context, highlighting that whilst rubric design is initially a time-consuming task, rubrics often result in better student attainment (i.e. the quality of submitted student work is improved following rubric implementation). A further co-benefit is that student satisfaction in the marking and feedback process may be improved by

using rubrics (Bell et al., 2013; Jackel et al., 2017). Despite these co-benefits it is interesting to note that student participants claimed the rubrics they viewed were 'too vague' and 'did not provide useful information'. Clearly a primary function of feedback is to enhance student performance, however, Bailey and Garner (2010) question the language that educators use when providing feedback in Higher Education, highlighting that it can be poorly understood by learners and indeed this is also the case for rubrics.

Interestingly, these authors highlight that there needs to be an 'intellectual readiness' if a student is to understand the feedback they are given (Bailey and Garner, 2010). The significance of this is that individual learners appear to need their feedback to be tailored to them ('personalised'), and the language used within rubrics may represent a barrier to, instead of opportunity for aiding student progression (Reddy and Andrade, 2007). Students may be unaware of how to interpret a given criteria (Orsmond and Merry, 1996) and this is reflected in the responses provided by the participants of the focus groups.

It is clearly worth considering the language used by practitioners. In Gedye's (2010) review of formative assessment, poor comprehension of feedback language was noted. Indeed, other authors (e.g. Dowden et al., 2013; Jonsson, 2013) also comment on the language used, highlighting that it is indeed one barrier that limits student learning, and compromises the assessment feedback process. Here we support these ideas and endorse an approach where practitioners review (i.e. check student understanding of) the rubric assessment criteria, and gauge understanding of an assessment criteria with each cohort. Critically, here some students argued that rubrics can help them understand the grade awarded and provide them complementary feedback on an assessment. This demonstrates how rubrics can play a role in assessment 'transparency' – a concept promoted in the Advance Higher Education (formerly the Higher Education Academy) (2017) review of assessment and feedback. However, there are concerns exceptionally detailed

assessment criteria can be overly prescriptive, and even promote surface approaches to learning (Biggs, 1996; Worth, 2012).

Affective response to feedback

The reception of feedback differs between students. Some students appreciate the honesty and directness of assessment feedback and find negative comments useful. However, for others, feedback needs to include both praise and criticism. One interesting finding was that students value a sense of progression. Students like when a lecturer identify that improvements have been made from previous assessments.

I'd rather have that criticism and then know what I've got to do next time

I think I'd appreciate the honesty

Actually, prefer it, because I like to know what I need to change. Say if I'm going on completely the wrong track and then someone tells me 'You need to do it this way instead', then I'm more confident then, going forward to do the rest of it I think

I would rather someone be really mean to me and say everything that I've done wrong than try and be nice about it. If I've got a bad mark, I've got a bad mark, you don't have to put it in a nice way, just tell me how to improve.

First year students expressed a preference for positive feedback to encourage them, finding negative comments discouraging. Conversely, some participants

highlighted that negative feedback should be seen as constructive and is important for helping them improve their attainment. Similarly, Weaver (2006) investigated perceptions of feedback, and report that negative comments were highlighted by certain participants as unhelpful. Weaver (2006) therefore argued for a balance between positive and negative comments. We support the view that the language used is important to consider, and will impact how satisfied a student feels about assessment and feedback procedure.

The findings revealed that how students deal with feedback appears to vary in association with the tutor providing the feedback. For example, some students suggest they are more likely to address feedback from lecturers they 'like' because they argued that the tutor would be more willing to help.

I think it also depends on the lecturer it's coming from.

I think if you've got a good relationship with a lecturer, I feel like they are going to help you more because they want you to do well, whereas if you have a bad relationship and then you receive bad marks off them, you are like, I'm not going to listen to your feedback because I don't know why you've given me such harsh marks.

And if you have a good relationship you could email. You can if you don't have a good relationship but when you've got a good relationship you are more likely to say, "Oh hi, please can I meet up with you so we can discuss this?"

Students were sensitive to the language used in the feedback suggesting that for them feedback was more useful when it is constructive and balanced.

I think I'm quite sensitive, so I'd probably take that quite badly. If it was all negative, I would probably think, 'Oh, I didn't do anything right, at all.'

Carless and Boud (2018) indicate that students often have an emotional response to feedback and therefore their likelihood to act on such feedback may, in part be moderated by the students' perception of the tutor providing the feedback. This study provides further evidence that affective response of students to feedback plays an important role in the reception and effectiveness of the feedback. Sutton (2012), for example, emphasise that students respond positively to feedback when they feel the tutor is invested in: (i) the subject matter being taught; and (ii) helping them improve the quality of their work and their professional development. It has been highlighted previously that the emotional 'readiness' of the learner to benefit from feedback is an important dimension to the feedback process and can strongly influence how students perceive the feedback they receive, thus their satisfaction in the assessment process (Dowden et al., 2013).

Summary and considerations

In this study we reported on perceptions and expectations of feedback from undergraduate students within the geography subject area, capturing the experiences of 47 students. The work highlights that student preferences, understanding, and ability to act on feedback is related to a range of issues, including: (i) poor understanding of terminology used by practitioners; (ii) the format in which the feedback is provided; and (iii) the tone of the feedback provided. Whilst many of the issues expressed by students are not new (cf. Carless, 2006), they appear to persist in Higher Education. Our findings can be summarised as follows:

- *Negative feedback will not always be noted and acted on by our students.* There is a need to consider the tone of any feedback to ensure it has the intended outcomes.

- *Students do not always see the value in reviewing their summative feedback.* There is a need to highlight the value in engaging with feedback linked to summative tasks to promote student agency and independence.
- *The tone of our language is important. Students cannot always understand what is required of them.* There is a need to take care when designing rubrics, so they are understandable and useful to our students both before and after the completion of any given assessment.

In summary, these findings illustrate that the students surveyed value a diverse range of feedback approaches, and the preference of any feedback approach varies at the individual level. Often geography programmes within Higher Education are assessed using a diverse range of assessment tools, thus, we argue that one might expect feedback to reflect this. A 'one-size fits all' approach may not always encourage students to engage with the feedback provided or move towards becoming independent learners. This may be especially the case with our discipline, where within 'geography' a broad range of subject specific pedagogies exist within the respective sub-disciplines aligned to the humanities, social, and natural sciences. As an additional outcome of this study, we bring attention to the need to engage students more actively in the assessment process to promote assessment literacy. By providing students a clearer idea of standards, expectations, and assessment procedures, practitioners may be able to enhance educational attainment.

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Disclosure Statement

All materials included in the article represent the authors' own work. This research has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere. The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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