

## **Making connections: Using technology to improve student engagement with feedback**

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## About this paper and background to the study

Present findings of a research study to **identify technology interventions** that **might help students make connections between the feedback that they receive and their future learning**



### Background

- ‘Understanding student learning from feedback’:
  - found that students understood what feedback is and how it should be used, but ...
  - ... they struggled to make connections between feedback received and future assignments
  - highlighted the need for further investigation into how tutors construct the feedback given and how students deconstruct that feedback

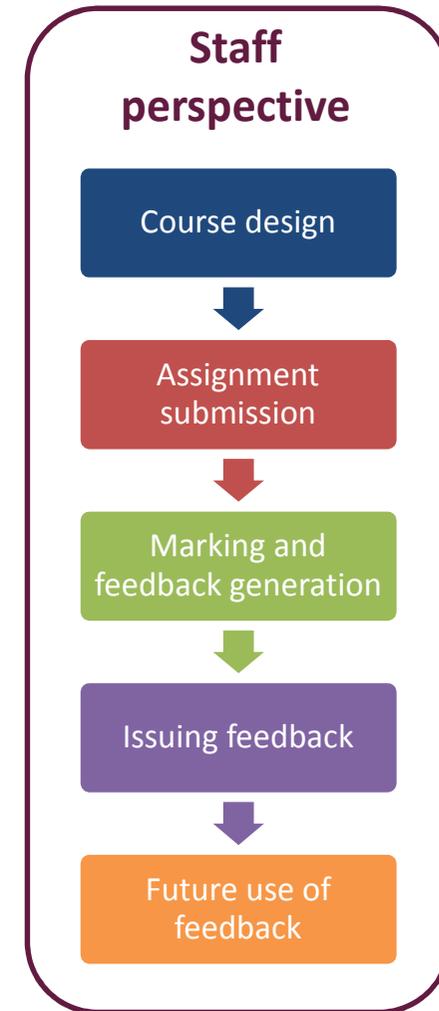
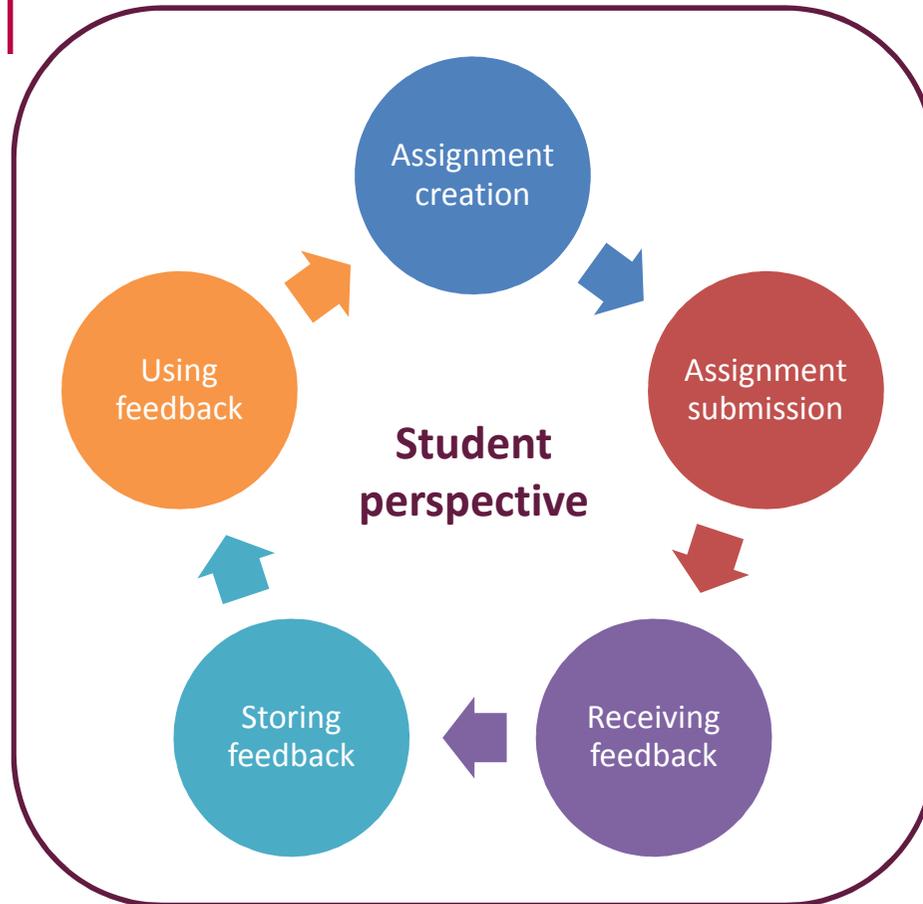
## Objectives of the study

1. To understand the intended purpose and meaning of feedback given by tutors
2. To investigate student understanding, intended use and actual use of feedback received by students
3. To identify any disparities between the intended meaning of feedback and the actual understanding of feedback
4. To explore the connections that students are able to make between the feedback that they receive and future assignments
5. To identify any technological interventions that might help students to make connections between the feedback that they receive and future assignments

## Methodology

- Worked with 10 tutors and 20 students:
  - **Tutor participants** - interviewed using a semi-structured approach **designed to explore the assessment and feedback approach and feedback given to a Level 5 cohort of students**
  - **Student participants** - recruited from the modules of participating tutors and interviewed using a semi-structured approach to **explore the assignment journey and feedback provided by the tutor participant**
- Data analysed during a two-day workshop attended by four members of QESS

**Findings**



## The student perspective

### Assignment creation

- *The process of writing an assignment was investigated: how and where students prefer to work, resources students referred to, students' use of previous feedback, how technology is used*
- Students have **varied preferences** for 'where' they work
- Students need to be able to **access the resources** that will enable them to complete assignments to the best of their ability
- Few students referred back to feedback after **an initial read through**
- Students were more likely to **refer to feedback** where they could see **clear links** between two assignments
- Students struggled to identify connections beyond surface level aspects

## The student perspective

### Assignment submission

- Practices and preferences for assignment submission varied
- Where work is submitted hard copy and in person, some students **felt assured** that their work had been received
- Other students **felt more secure** submitting work online
- Students appreciated the **ease and convenience** of online submission
- An element of **mistrust** from some students who were concerned about technical issues affecting submission
- Students want to **receive receipts** for work submitted online
- Online deadlines were **usually set later** than hard copy hand-ins
- Students **valued early feedback** on drafts; in some cases Turnitin was being used to provide formative feedback on student writing

## The student perspective



### Receiving feedback

- Students received feedback in a variety of formats and mediums; preferences naturally varied
- Students value feedback that is **directly linked to assessment criteria**
- Students appreciated the **convenience and ease of access** of feedback issued online
- Online feedback offers students the opportunity to **read their feedback in privacy**
- Some students did prefer hard copy feedback, but reasons relate to **aspects that could be achieved electronically** (e.g. annotated scripts)
- Some students received their grades online and their feedback hard copy. Students were **less likely to engage** with their feedback if there was a **separation of grades and feedback**, with grades being published first
- Students initial (and subsequent) **reactions** to feedback varied

## The student perspective



### Storing feedback

- Students valued feedback and would **never disregard it**
- Some students have **logical storage systems** for feedback
- There was a clear need for feedback to be **'in one place'**
- Students were more likely to refer to feedback at the point of writing their next assignment if it was **accessible to them**
- Students claimed to **'recall'** feedback but found it difficult to articulate these processes

## The student perspective

### Using feedback

- Students were more likely to refer back to feedback when completing assignments that were **similar in format**
- Some students actively **looked for patterns** in the feedback that they receive and made a **conscious effort to improve**
- Feedback on aspects such as structure, layout and referencing were seen as **transferable**
- Students were **less able to see connections** between content-specific feedback and future assignments

## The staff perspective

### Course design

- All staff were aware of the assessments that students would take in the module but were **less confident** about the **assessment diet across the course**
- Concerns were raised that the **three-week turnaround** on feedback could affect the **quality of feedback** given to students
- Some concerns that the **new assessment task limit** was **restricting the opportunity** for early feedback

## The staff perspective

### Assignment submission

- The **method** of assignment submission was determined by the module leader
- Methods of submission were determined by **preferences for marking**
- Some instances of **dual submission**, once through Turnitin and then a hard copy submitted to their assignment hand-in point
- An acknowledgement that there are some **benefits to students** by allowing online submission

## The staff perspective

### Marking and feedback generation

- Staff liked, and it was important for them, to **mark in a quiet space**
- Staff used **a variety of techniques** for marking assignments (including handwritten or electronic marginal comments, cover sheets and marking grids)
- Many staff commented on marking being **a time-consuming process** and employed techniques to try and mark efficiently (including comment banks)
- Some staff felt **strongly against** marking onscreen
- A **frustration** for some staff was the **inefficiency of the current technology** available to support online marking
- Some staff have **developed their own mechanisms** to mark assignments more efficiently outside of Blackboard

## The staff perspective

### Issuing feedback

- The method of returning feedback was **determined** by how the assignments were being marked
- Where feedback is hard copy, students were **expected to collect it** from their assessment hand-in point (or it was given out in lectures or seminars)
- There were **concerns** that where students were expected to collect feedback **they do not always do so**, and this was particularly the case **where grades have already been released online**
- The **administrative burden** of issuing feedback online was **no more cumbersome** than the amount of work involved in returning hard copy feedback
- Staff were aware that students **experienced frustration** where feedback was **not delivered at the expected time**

## The staff perspective

### Future use of feedback

- Staff have built in **formal opportunities** to discuss feedback with their students
- Staff have also offered **informal opportunities** for students to discuss feedback
- Despite students being aware of these opportunities, they **often did not take up the opportunity for dialogue**
- Staff **hoped that students would apply feedback** in future assignments, modules and future careers
- Although staff **hope to see an improvement** in student work from one level to the next, **they did not specifically look for application of feedback**

## Recommendations

Our challenge is to achieve consistency from the student perspective whilst embracing the variety of practice from the staff perspective

### 1. Course design

- Staff should have an awareness of all assessments that students are likely to take
- This will enable staff to consider how their feedback might feed into other modules
- An online **'assessment map'** at course level would be a useful tool

### 2. Assignment creation

- Resources should be 'accessible' to students
- Assessment briefs and assessment criteria should be **available online** alongside other assessment information such as grades and feedback
- A **'central location'** for all assessment and feedback will enable students to identify links between assessments

## Recommendations

### 3. Assignment submission

- There are clear benefits to making online submission the norm. It will:
  - make **better use of student time** and **reduce money** spent on resources such as paper, printing and postage
  - **reduce duplication** of effort (where dual submission is currently required)
  - **streamline the process** from an administrative perspective
- Online submission **does not necessarily mean online marking**, but gives the opportunity to choose how staff want to mark
- All assignment deadlines **should be set within normal working hours**
- **Turnitin** offers an **opportunity for early formative feedback** on academic writing and referencing. Encourage students to use the reports provided to **improve drafts of their work**

## Recommendations

### 4. Marking and feedback generation

- The **development of an end-to-end online marking experience for staff** could facilitate ease and efficiency of marking online, with the end-point being the issuing of feedback in a single place. This tool could accommodate offline marking and staff who have developed their own solutions to marking electronically

## Recommendations

### 5. Issuing and receiving feedback

- Respect the variety of forms in which feedback is produced, though **students like to store all of their feedback in one place**
- The onus is on students to print electronic feedback to store with feedback that they receive hardcopy. By making online feedback the norm, it will
  - **fulfil preferences** for online or hardcopy feedback (students can choose to keep all feedback online or print it)
  - enable students **access to feedback at the point of need**
- Online feedback **does not necessarily mean online marking**
- Grades and feedback **should be issued together** (at the same time and medium)
- Students value feedback that is **aligned to assessment criteria**. Marking grids can achieve this. Students also value **'in context' feedback**, but this must reinforce criteria-based feedback
- Advertising **'feedback dates'** in a similar manner to assessment deadline dates will make clear to students when they will expect to receive feedback and reduce their anxieties

## Recommendations

### 6. Storing feedback

- Students like to **store their feedback in one place** and are more likely to refer to feedback if it is stored alongside the rest of their learning materials
- The development of an **online assessment and feedback store** could enable students to retrieve all feedback from all modules in a single place, alongside an assessment calendar, links to PDP and **promote dialogue** between tutors and students
- Use of **personal development portfolios** can encourage students to reflect on their feedback and **formalise the (often) subconscious processes** that students use to 'recall' feedback

## Recommendations

### 7. Using feedback

- Students struggle to identify connections between assessments on each of their modules. A clear **'map' of all assessments** will enable students to identify potential connections
- Offer students the **opportunity to discuss their feedback**. This will encourage students to use feedback in future assignments

