

Student Perceptions of Assessment Feedback: When to Guide and When to Grade?

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Abstract

In the brave new world of a competitive, marketized, higher education sector, the range of performance measures, and the importance placed on them, is driving institutions to evaluate and react to students' perceptions about the quality of delivery and overall effectiveness of their education. In many developed countries, such as the UK, education budgets are subject to governmental austerity programmes and the cost of studying for a degree is being transferred from the public purse to individual students. This shift in responsibility focusses attention on the relative worth of education between study choices and between competing institutions. Consequently, measures of student satisfaction, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), are of increasing importance both in terms of informing student choice about what and where to study and reflecting the credibility of their taken programme to employers.

The matter of feedback strategy and design has received copious attention over the years in the education literature; although, the majority of articles tend to report innovative ways of providing formative feedback in relatively small cohorts of students, at a module rather than programme level.

This article explores students' perceptions of feedback in the context of business education, where cohort and class sizes are typically in the hundreds rather than dozens and formal feedback is mainly of a summative nature.

With enrolment still rising, tutors in business schools need to design assessment strategies that are cost effective, deliverable given tight turnaround times and, at the same time, provide appropriate feedback to guide the learning process and explain grading decisions. With constraints on providing high levels of individual feedback students need to be encouraged to learn independently by making best use a range of feedback mechanisms, some of which may be obvious and others that might presently not be recognised as 'feedback'.

The findings suggest that that students tend to take a strategic approach to studying and their instrumental use of feedback is reflected in the current three NSS questions:

- "Feedback on my work has been prompt"
- "I have received detailed comments on my work"
- "Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand"

Tutors are conscious of the need to provide a framework that encourages independent learning and balances the process of guidance with grading. A conclusion is that the sense students make of their feedback might be more effective if both teaching and assessment are more overtly aligned with the core aims of programme and how these are reflected in individual modules outcomes. Recommendations include: the need to better manage the transition into higher education; to make the alignment of grading criteria closely linked to learning outcomes and to lobby for more relevant NSS questions about feedback.

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