The feedback process: Perspectives of first and second year undergraduate students in the disciplines of education, health science and nursing

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Keywords

Introduction

Diagnostic feedback for both students and staff is a universal process across disciplines, informing lifelong learning and teaching practices (Richardson 2005). The importance of feedback in higher education is also evident internationally through the research and development of resources such as the HEA Feedback Toolkit (Higher Education Academy 2015). This project contributes to the current research on feedback within the context of first- and second-year student perceptions of feedback processes.

Feedback can be defined as information that individuals receive about their actions; according to Vardi (2012), academics view feedback as information that students receive during or after an activity, assessment or evaluation item, when expressing an opinion or answering a question. This feedback, which can be incorporated into both face-to-face and online learning experiences (Getzlaf et al. 2009), needs to be both timely and effective to affect student performance (Poulos & Mahony 2008). Feedback is recognised as an essential academic activity embedded into higher-education curricula to enable students to learn and improve. Academics hope that students can use it constructively to achieve learning outcomes, but acknowledge that its impact can be both negative and positive (Hattie & Timperley 2007).

Generally, academics provide feedback to their students throughout their units and courses, but students often report a lack of feedback in relation to their studies, and are underwhelmed by what feedback they do receive (Strong et al. 2012). This may be due to a misalignment between tutors' and students' perceptions of feedback (Hyland 2000; Orsmond & Merry 2011; Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013), and can also depend on the students' entry level and degree program (Strong et al. 2012). According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) comments on formative assessment and feedback within higher education, feedback is a transmission process from teacher to student intended to provide positive outcomes in terms of student learning. These outcomes have been challenged recently by other researchers (Sadler 1998; Boud 2000; Yorke 2003). Sadler (1998) queries whether this process is equitable or appropriate to students' development of learning.

The quality of student learning is determined by students' prior experiences, knowledge, motivation to study, perceptions of learning and teaching and approaches to study (Biggs & Tang 2007). As a result, students may be naive in relation to their perceptions and understanding of feedback processes. Furthermore, some academics believe that providing feedback is unproductive, as students are only interested in marks (Doan 2013), and as some students lack the ability or understanding to act on the feedback to support their academic improvement (Weaver 2006). Studies that investigate student perceptions of feedback and its use provide some insight and directions for further research (e.g. Hepplestone & Chikwa 2014; Marriott & Teoh 2012; Murtagh & Baker 2009; Parkes, Abercrombie & McCarty 2013). However, according to Jonsson (2013), the ways students receive and use feedback are still not well researched, as they are difficult to quantify.

The literature suggests key contextual areas relevant to this study: types of feedback provided to students, usefulness of feedback to student learning and student perception and awareness of individual feedback processes.

Types of feedback

University students often seek useful feedback, both formative and summative, regarding their learning status (Price et al. 2010, Vardi 2012). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007, p.7), good feedback that enhances learning incorporates answers to three questions: "Where am I going?", "How am I going?" and "Where to next?" This can be achieved from many sources and in many different forms including verbal feedback, written feedback, online feedback and peer feedback, and needs to be clear, constructive and timely (Devrim 2014). However, feedback is complex in that it can occur at four different levels: task, process, self-regulation and personal (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Whether undergraduate students are able to identify these different levels of feedback is uncertain, and requires that they learn the forms and meaning of feedback.

Throughout their university studies, students receive feedback on formative and summative components of their units of study, including assessment tasks. Student and teacher understanding of the link between formative and summative assessment can vary (MacLellan 2001; Taras 2008), although it is clear that formative assessment can significantly affect student motivation to learn (Cauley & McMillan 2010), and that most students do integrate their feedback from all assessment tasks (Brookhart 2001). Yorke (2003) argues that whilst educators acknowledge the value of and use formative assessment in student learning, the "psychology of giving and receiving feedback" and the epistemological and theoretical stances that underpin feedback are generally not well developed or integrated. Whilst students commonly note that they receive feedback via comments on their assignments and use this feedback to improve future work (Murtagh & Baker 2009), Yorke (2003) suggests that qualitative enquiry should establish how effective students think the feedback the process is. In specifically addressing feedback in higher education, Yorke (2003) supports a theoretical stance that encapsulates epistemology, psychology, and student and assessor perspectives, with a summary of the necessary features for effective formative assessment (Table 1).

Table 1. Features of a theory of effective formative assessment (Yorke 2003, p.493)
Assessors are aware of:
- the epistemology of the discipline   - stages of student intellectual and moral development   - the individual student's knowledge and stage of intellectual development   - the psychology of giving and receiving feedback.
Assessors communicate with ("with" is preferable to "to" here) students regarding how their work might subsequently develop.
Students actively seek to elicit the meaning from formative comment.
Students are prepared to act on the basis of their developed understandings.

In discussing the qualitative aspects of formative feedback, Yorke (2003) cites the work of Mentkowski and associates (2000), who recognise the conflicting duality in comparing both the assessors' and the students' perceptions of the experience. Giles, Gilbert & McNeill (2014) report that, given a choice, a large percentage of final-year nursing students at Flinders University in

South Australia would like the option of choosing the amount and type of feedback on their summative written assignments, although it is not clear how this choice would affect the quality of student learning. It is well established, though, that feedback on formative assessments enables students to self-regulate and be proactive in using feedback, whereas feedback on summative assessments allows students to be reactive and look at ways to improve (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Yorke 2003). However, the impact of different types of feedback will vary among student populations (Vardi 2012), and there is no perfect way to provide feedback within a curriculum (Higher Education Academy 2015). For example, as shown by Devrim (2014), the less proficient the student, the more explicit the written feedback needs to be for them to scaffold their learning effectively.

Usefulness of feedback to learning

The reason for providing feedback to students is to enable them to enhance their learning and achieve their course's learning outcomes. To accomplish this, feedback needs to be academically rigorous as well as constructively aligned to the curriculum (Biggs 1999). Howland and Moore (2002) found that structured feedback, provided continuously, was essential for certain students to engage with their learning, and that instructors were not always fulfilling this student need. A study of students in business and arts faculties suggested that feedback should be constructive and aligned with desired learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and guide and motivate students rather than just providing a form of diagnosis and justification (Weaver 2006). The effectiveness of feedback may be independent of its timing (Shute 2008), but it is widely acknowledged that delayed feedback on complex tasks can be beneficial to student learning (Archer 2010; Vardi 2012). A study of 350 humanities students concluded that students should be able to act on feedback to improve in future assessments or learning activities, but that this is sometimes limited or affected by the previous knowledge they bring from secondary or college education (Burke 2009). Higgins et al. (2002, p.62), states that "it is not usually sufficient simply to tell a student where they have gone wrong – misconceptions need to be *explained* and improvements for future work suggested."

Academics generally try to allow students to become aware of their own progress, and recognise how to use information, such as feedback, in a positive way. Instructors encourage students to use skills such as reflection in combination with feedback to recognise their learning status and identify areas in which they can improve. Quinton and Smallbone (2010) emphasise the importance of embedding reflection into curriculum design, as written feedback can be used to reflect on learning. This enables students to use the feed-forward process and has the potential to positively influence their future assessments.

However, students do not always welcome feedback or use it effectively. MacLellan (2001) found that third-year undergraduate students at the University of Strathclyde did not find feedback either routinely helpful or a catalyst for discussion, recognising no benefit or stimulus to their learning. This may well be a reflection of students' self-esteem: they can feel discouraged by feedback (MacLellan 2001), and this can hinder their improvement. Robinson, Pope and Holyoak (2013) reported, in their study of 166 first-year undergraduate students, that some students experienced a negative emotional response to the feedback from their teachers. Young (2000) also reports that there is a tendency for students who are identified as having low self-esteem to take any comment as a reflection on them personally, whereas high self-esteem students see feedback as a reflection of their work.

Feedback perception and awareness

At this point, a distinction should be made between feedback perception and awareness. There is a growing body of research on feedback perception, i.e., how staff give and how students feel or react to feedback (Bevan et al. 2008; Devrim 2014; Getzlaf et al. 2009; Hyland 2000; Price et al. 2010; Van De Ridder et al. 2008; Vardi 2012; Weaver 2006). Students' misconceptions of feedback can be derived from their past experiences, which have enabled them to construct a personalised idea of the nature of feedback. However, before students react to feedback, they need to be aware of it, recognise it and acknowledge it. Their unawareness or misconception of feedback is, therefore, often directly related to their lack of knowledge of its true definition and may result in their naivety in this area. Hence, instructors need to ascertain the meaning and scope from students' personal experience, to determine their knowledge and perception of feedback. This will allow instructors to most effectively enable students to use and benefit from feedback. The literature review generated four distinct research questions that informed the aims of this study.

Aims of the study

This study aimed to determine whether students actively seek feedback and their perceptions of its value to their education.

Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

- What do learners perceive as feedback?
- How do learners perceive the educational value of feedback?
- How and why do learners actively seek feedback?
- How do learners respond to feedback?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this research project were undergraduate students from the first-semester 2013 enrolment in first-year health sciences degrees (biomedical science, exercise science, environmental health, health science and medical radiation science), first-year education degrees (physical activity and health) and second-year nursing degrees at the University of Tasmania. All students surveyed were enrolled in blended courses taught in face-to-face and online contexts and were situated at one of the three University of Tasmania campuses. The rationale for choosing this specific cohort of students was their accessibility to the investigators. A total of 587 enrolled students were invited to participate in the project. Both genders, diverse age groups and both English speaking and non-English speaking backgrounds were represented. For example, a large number of nursing students enrolled at the Darlinghurst campus (NSW) are of Nepalese origin. Table 2 describes the group demographic distribution of the student cohort selected.

Table 2. Demographic data of student cohorts surveyed

Groups	Number of students enrolled	Location
First-year education	79	Launceston (Tasmania)
First-year health sciences	104	Launceston (Tasmania)
Second-year nursing	59	Darlinghurst (NSW)
	123	Rozelle (NSW)
	222	Launceston (Tasmania)

Design

This study was conducted using a paper-based survey instrument with open-ended questions that the students answered with simple or complex qualitative statements (Appendix A). To address how students in three different cohorts perceived the feedback process, we designed one common questionnaire to satisfy the project aims for all participants in this study. An extensive literature review partly informed our study, but did not identify a relevant existing survey instrument. Initially a number of questions were developed by the investigators (team of academics currently teaching the specific student cohort). These were then refined to produce the survey instrument. The participant response was entirely voluntary and participants were clearly informed that the survey responses would be completely de-identified and their grades would not be affected in any way. This research study was approved by University of Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee as a minimum-risk application (H19113). Student consent for participation in the research project was indicated by completing the survey.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed in a classroom setting by a University of Tasmania staff member independent to the study. All the responses were provided on printed surveys and all of the response sheets were scanned and placed in a secure database accessible only to the investigators of this study. All responses were studied in detail by the investigators and discussed in a number of analysis meetings.

Data analysis

Basic descriptive statistics were determined for quantitative responses to survey questions to identify key response frequencies. Qualitative statements were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). All investigators reviewed the student comments, discussed them and agreed upon common categories. Formative and summative comments were coded according to whether the students referred to the formative (how the feedback information would be useful to their learning) or summative (how the iterative cycle of feedback could improve their grades).

Quantitative data analysis was carried out by initially converting the student response numbers into percentages (Y axis) against selected types of response (Questions 4a and 4b; in X axis, as indicated in graphs). The converted percentages were plotted as bar graphs (Figures 1 and 2) using the statistical software Graphpad Prism, Version 6.

After the initial formative and summative coding, responses were further analysed according to the nature of their content. Each investigator identified important and relevant comments and further noted down interesting or pertinent quotes. Investigator notes were exchanged and discussed in detail to arrive at a common platform identifying themes for further analysis. In the second stage of analysis, key concepts were identified and emerging themes extracted. The themes were validated by revisiting and confirming the original statements and identified theme areas.

Results

A total of 587 students were offered the surveys, with respondents submitting 321 surveys, representing 55% of the total student cohort. Appendix A illustrates the questions analysed from the survey. Survey responses were collated and analysed using basic descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

The study sample represented first-year and second-year students. Fifty-two percent of first-year education and health-science students actively sought feedback, while 68% of second-year nursing students actively sought feedback. Analysis of the qualitative responses of the questionnaire indicated similar themes across the year levels.

Student responses to the possible forms of feedback that they received in their academic units of study within their course (degree) varied greatly, with 55% of respondents identifying electronic or written forms of feedback as the most common source. For general types of assessment in which feedback was received, we categorised the diverse responses into "no response", "quiz/MCQ/test" and "essays and assignments" (Figure 1), with essays and assignments the most identified forms of feedback.
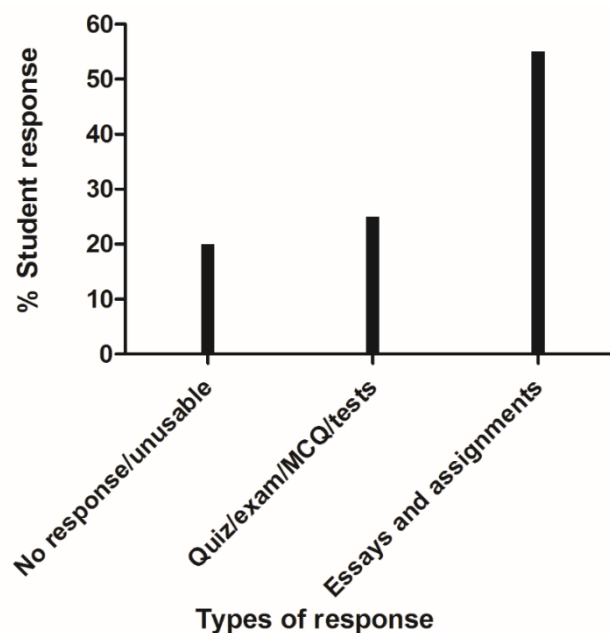
Figure 1. Examples of general feedback reported by students in this study (n=321)

Survey responses to learning activities in which feedback should be given were coded as summative or formative. Twenty-four percent of respondents identified formative learning activities as a type of feedback and acknowledged the need to connect feedback to improve and enhance learning. A further 51% of respondents identified various forms of feedback to be summative, and 18% identified both formative and summative processes as forms of feedback. Overall, 34% of respondents clearly stated that they only wanted feedback on summative assessment items.

In this study, timeliness was highlighted as a key determinant to seeking feedback, with over 50% of students indicating that this had a negative impact on their feedback experience. Survey responses regarding the importance of the timeliness of feedback were categorised as "no response", "ambivalent", "negative" or "positive" (Figure 2), with over 20% of respondents not indicating whether timeliness was a key factor in their feedback experience.
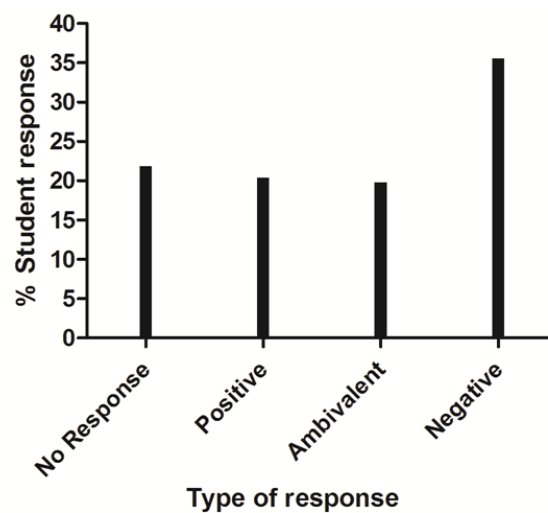
Figure 2. Timeliness of feedback process as indicated by students (n=321)

Why students actively sought feedback was of particular interest to this study. Thirteen percent of respondents identified that they would usually seek feedback to clarify results and/or improve their learning. Forty percent of respondents typically asked staff for feedback via email or face-to-face, while 8% used assignment comments and results, with online processes identified by 4% of respondents as a means by which they actively sought feedback. Whilst the use of peers as a source of feedback was not as evident as the use of staff, 2% of the respondents did use some form of peer feedback, and 2% identified proofreading as an active means of seeking feedback.

In this study, impact on personal time was sometimes identified as a barrier to seeking feedback, with 2% of respondents identifying lack of staff time and 3% identifying lack of student time.

Other reasons for not seeking feedback were related to previous negative experiences (7%) or the perception by students that they had already received adequate feedback (6%), while 12% were undecided about the value of feedback. It was also determined that 19% felt that feedback was not helpful due to lack of specificity, being overly critical, not informing for the next assignment and not having the test paper returned to compare with the feedback.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from the questions answered by respondents in this study enabled key themes to be determined. This resulted in the identification of four main themes, which will be discussed below:

- Forms of feedback
- Student role in seeking feedback
- Feedback perception and awareness
- Educational value of feedback to learning.

Discussion

Forms of feedback

Students seek good feedback from their teachers to improve, build their confidence and meet required learning outcomes (Vardi 2012); the results from this study indicate that students do acknowledge the importance of feedback, as indicated by comments such as "*All units should have a feedback process*". This process largely depends on feedback received on assignments, as the findings of this study support the current literature, in which students often identify written comments on assignments as key feedback to their learning (e.g. Lizzio & Wilson 2008). Students also have a tendency to regard feedback only in terms of information provided to them as part of assessment; this encompasses both written and online formats, with online often occurring via a learning management system (referred to as MyLO (My Learning Online) at the University of Tasmania). As a result, students clearly identified essays and assignments as the most common types of assessment in which feedback was provided (55% of respondents), while only 25% identified quizzes, exams and tests (Figure 1).

Vardi (2012) suggests that although it is important to ensure that students are provided with regular formative feedback, it is also essential to ensure that opportunities are provided to build on this feedback in subsequent assessments. This requires feedback to be connected within a unit and across a course of study in formative and summative contexts. Formative learning is achieved when formative feedback addresses learning goals and enables students to improve performance (Sadler 1989). Twenty-four percent of respondents in our study did identify formative comments as important to connect feedback to learning improvement. However, 34% clearly stated that they only wanted feedback on summative assessment items; this suggests that students do not always recognise that feedback is linked to learning as well as assessment. To some extent, this illustrates the potential naivety of the cohort and demonstrates a need to inform students about different forms of feedback, and when and where they are occurring, in a range of learning and teaching contexts, as suggested by Vardi (2012). Less than a quarter of the respondents recognised formative types of feedback in this study, indicating that there was a lack of common understanding of what formative assessment and feedback actually means (Orsmond, Merry & Callaghan 2004; Wiliam & Black 1996). This is supported by Brookhart (2001), who found that English and anatomy students do not make clear distinctions between formative and summative

assessment. This further identifies the inability of many students to use formative assessment and feedback successfully. Furthermore, Yorke (2003) outlines the importance of effective pedagogical practice to underpin constructive formative feedback.

It was interesting to note that some respondents in this study were using feedback as a component in self-reflection. One respondent commented that they used the feedback to *"Reflect on my own practice"*. Academics generally try to introduce self-reflection into units of study to allow students to become aware of their own progress and incorporate feedback into their learning in a positive way. Quinton and Smallbone (2010) emphasise the importance of embedding reflection into curriculum design and that "feedback on written work can be used as a vehicle for reflection". This capture of feedback reflection enables students to use the feed-forward process and positively influence their future assessments, enriching the value of formative feedback.

The timeliness of feedback is often thought to be critical to academic rigour, as it enables students to learn and improve within a unit of study and across units within their enrolled course. It also enables the development and achievement of intended learning outcomes. However, our data (Figure 2) did not indicate a clear student preference for timeliness of feedback with respect to their current units of study, with only 22% positively viewing timeliness of feedback as necessary (indicated by the "positive" response in Figure 2). According to Vardi (2012), immediate feedback is an evaluative and instructive process that encourages and motivates student learning, Furthermore, Poulos and Mahony (2008) identified timeliness of feedback as a crucial factor to feedback effectiveness for Health Science students at the University of Sydney across all years of study. However, the students in this study did not identify timeliness of feedback as crucial. Hattie and Timperley (2007) assert that timeliness depends on the difficulty of an assessment item: the degree of processing that the task requires determines whether feedback is provided immediately or delayed, If an assessment task is complex and challenging, requiring students to draw together concepts and ideas, delayed feedback will be inevitable (Vardi 2012), but as Archer (2010) demonstrated, the delay may even be beneficial, particularly for high-achieving students. Respondents in this study received feedback on complex assignments immediately in online contexts and after a delay in other formats, and our results indicate that the nature of the feedback is more important to students overall than the timeliness.

Vardi (2012) states that students often need assistance not only to identify and seek feedback, but also to evaluate it and use it effectively. Our results indicate that students often have a limited view of what feedback is, relying heavily on assessment tasks as a key feedback process. In particular, 25% of respondents emphasised quizzes, tests and exams as an important source of feedback (Figure 1). However, feedback can come from a variety of sources and in a number of different forms, as identified by student perceptions in this study; moreover, students expressed preferences among feedback types based on how they sought feedback rather than now timely it was.

Student role in seeking feedback (actively seeking feedback)

Overall in this study, 62% of respondents actively sought feedback, while 31% did not, with active seeking of feedback particularly evident in second-year students studying nursing. This may be a reflection of the nature of the nursing degree, particularly in second year when professional-

experience practicums become a core focus of their learning and their ability to gain feedback on their developing skills is encouraged and essential as they approach graduation: "*On prac placement I was asking the nurses if I could have done that procedure better, completed that more quickly, etc.*"

The survey data clearly indicated that staff contact was the key to actively seeking feedback, whether it be through face-to-face or online delivery, as 13% of respondents identified that they would usually seek feedback to clarify results and/or improve their learning and 40% asked staff for feedback via email or face-to-face. This supports the literature, where it is well documented that teaching staff are a dominant factor in the feedback process (Evans 2013). Peer feedback as a component of overall feedback, however, has grown considerably in recent years (Gielen, Dochy & Onghena 2011), although respondents in this study did not indicate the use of peers as strongly as the use of staff as a source of feedback. This could be due to a lack of student awareness of peer comments as a source of feedback, given that many of our students participate in study groups to benefit from peer support in learning.

Although the kind of feedback students in this study actively sought varied considerably, a strong theme of staff contact was evident. The qualitative responses in the survey often stressed asking teaching staff questions within and outside of class to enhance understanding and clarify learning:

> "*Asking teachers how I am going so I know what [I] do and don't need to work on*"

> "*Ask unit coordinator questions, email to see if I am on right track*"

> "*By going to my lecturer/marker and personally asking why I was marked down in some areas*"

> "*Asking lecturers/tutors for their suggestions/opinions*"

> "*I routinely ask questions throughout the sessions and post on MyLO or email*"

Participants attributed their choice not to actively seek feedback to a variety of reasons, with 6% of respondents stating that they felt that sufficient feedback was already given. This was particularly evident among first-year health-sciences and education students:

> "*I believe that there is enough feedback provided upon return of assessment tasks to confirm my understanding of ideas*"

> "*It is usually given without my persistence*"

According to Carless (2006), students have identified time management and negative judgement by staff as reasons to not seek feedback from tutors. In this study, both staff time and student time were identified as a barrier to seeking feedback, but negative experiences from seeking feedback were also highlighted, particularly amongst nursing students:

"Time and amount of effort can be a thing that hold[s] me back"

"Because for someone that really has to work hard for basic understanding of something, in the past when I have [sought] help I was made to feel very stupid and questioned why I was studying at all"

Seven percent of respondents indicated at least one negative experience associated with seeking feedback, including feedback being too confusing, unwelcome, of no benefit, too generic, a burden to staff or risky (as it may affect results). Negative experiences were particularly evident in the nursing-student cohort (9% of respondents):

"*Because usually the feedback is late or useless*"

"*Because there seems to be a large [number] of students being marked down further when they approach. Don't want to risk losing further marks*"

"Because every time I got the feedback it discouraged me rather than encouraging me"

"*Felt as if we were not welcome to seek additional feedback*"

"*People are slow and I don't get consistent feedback"*

This may indicate poor communication between staff and students in some cases and a misunderstanding of the value and role of feedback among some academic staff. It also highlights a need to ensure that all staff are providing consistent feedback that can feed forward for students to enhance their learning and academic performance.

Feedback perception and awareness

Feedback, in a generic sense, indicates to students what they know and don't know; presenting this information to students should help them to focus on their learning skills. However, feedback is not a stand-alone process and students need to be inherently aware of when and where they are receiving feedback, and to have the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned through using appropriate and relevant feedback. How well the lecturer/tutor constructs the feedback should be considered as important as how well the student interprets this information and puts it into practice in a learning context. The situation becomes more difficult when there are competing forms of feedback across multiple disciplines. Orsmond and Merry (2011, p.125) showed that tutors giving feedback focused on "praise and correcting mistakes", whilst the students' conceptions of what they should be receiving focused on "guidance, identifying what the tutor wants and giving meaning to the work to develop learning".

A small-scale study by Heppleston and Chikwa (2014) indicates that students at a UK university understood what feedback is but were unable to connect it with their subsequent assignments. This again highlights a need to ensure that tutors can provide constructive feedback and that students can interpret the feedback and apply it to future learning. Teaching staff need to make students aware of the feedback that they are providing, and feedback processes need to be clearly understood by both students and teaching staff.

In this study, students were not always able to make informed judgements about either the process of feedback or the integration of the feedback into future learning methodologies and related assignments. Many respondents indicated that they relied on feedback purely from teaching staff, especially in relation to assessment items, often indicating a lack of awareness of other forms of feedback, such as peer feedback. The current literature also does not provide unequivocal evidence that providing complex feedback results in marked gains in student performance on subsequent assessments. We suggest that this may be related to students' misunderstanding of feedback as a process, unawareness of when and where feedback is given to them, and also due to the non-productive use of feedback that has been identified by other authors (Hattie & Timperley 2007; Hepplestone & Chikwa 2014; Hounsell et al. 2008; Hyland 2000; Weaver, 2006).

Educational value of feedback to student learning

The value of feedback as a tool to inform student improvement and progress is well established in the literature (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon 2011; Harden & Laidlaw 2013; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Knight & Yorke 2004; Vardi 2012). Respondents to our survey generally stated that feedback on specific assessments was useful as it enabled them to improve for future assessment items ("*Helped structure second essay*") and situate their progression in relation to others in the unit ("*Let me know where I was in comparison to others*"). As in previous studies (Carless 2006), although the respondents in our study obviously viewed grades as important, many indicated that they were interested in more feedback rather than just a mark or grade, with 9% of respondents clearly indicating that they seek individualised feedback to enable them to improve.

This study determined that some students were undecided about the value of feedback, indicating that it was not useful. Some respondents commented that "*it wasn't helpful as it was blunt and critical*", and that they received "*minimal feedback with little constructive criticism*" while others stated that the feedback "*didn't tell me how to fix errors*". Several respondents, who may have done reasonably well academically, were critical of the lack of specific direction of certain feedback, as indicated by comments such as "*mostly positive which makes you feel good but no indication of what could have made it better*" and "*comments such as 'good' offer no useful feedback*". Again, this illustrates the need to ensure that teaching staff can provide and are aware of the role of constructive feedback for all students, regardless of the mark they receive for a particular assignment. As stated by Giles, Gilbert and McNeill (2014), "[i]f feedback is effective it has the potential to enhance student learning, and if it is efficient it will maximise teaching and learning resources".

The usefulness of feedback with respect to ongoing learning was further highlighted by comments from respondents grouped around common themes, such as not to repeat mistakes, help for next assignment, planning and addressing gaps in knowledge. Respondents were able to identify feedback as a way to assist understanding ("*Used it to focus on areas of learning I had difficulty with*") and to improve ("*Know what to improve and what I did well*"), particularly in future assessment items ("*So I can use this information and feedback to improve my future assignments*"). Furthermore, some students could identify feedback as a useful learning tool to enhance their learning ("*Taking constructive comments positively and working better for the future*"), gain confidence ("*It gave me confidence to continue in some areas and change in others*") and prepare for future assessments ("*Helped me prepare for the next test*").

Not all respondents in this study found feedback useful to their learning. Fifty-eight percent acknowledged that they were unsure if the feedback was helpful and 14% were undecided about

the value of feedback. A further 16% stated that feedback was not helpful. Generic comments were often reported to be of little value, with a preference for precise and targeted feedback evident:

> "*It is not helpful when markers just say 'well done' and do not offer advice on where you lost marks*"

> "*Didn't really help my learning, to be honest it was pretty pointless feedback*"

> "*I've never been given good constructive feedback for the purpose of my improvement of learning*"

These findings are supported by a study by MacLellan (2001), who found that most third-year undergraduate students at the University of Strathclyde did not find routine feedback on their learning helpful or a means of developing improvement. This further supports the notion that feedback must be constructive, of value, guided and designed to enable the student to improve (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2002; Weaver 2006).

Interestingly, discouragement was also a theme in the respondent comments, with words such as *"disappointed"*, *"discouraged"* and *"hopeless"* often used. These comments may well be a reflection of the self-esteem of the student. Young (2000), in a study on feedback in students in a college of higher education, found that there is a tendency for students with low self-esteem to take feedback personally, as an indictment of themselves. This could be true of our nursing, education and health-sciences students also, particularly at first year, when they are still transitioning into higher-education procedures and processes and feel inexperienced in academia.

An effective approach to making learning engaging involves providing clear, helpful feedback that guides students even in future assessment tasks (Thomas 2013). Students expect feedback, as shown by comments from respondents such as "*Whenever you hand in any sort of work you know where you stand with the unit and how to improve*" and "*All units should have a feedback process*". This study has clearly identified first- and second-year student perceptions of feedback to be varied but focused on a strong staff-student relationship, in which staff provide key feedback through face-to-face contact, email, online communication and assessments. According to this study, students often perceive feedback to be positive and of value, but they can be adversely affected by negative experiences, usually related to staff attitudes. Self-reflection and peer feedback is also recognised by some first- and second-year students, but is not as evident as a constructively aligned form of feedback within their curriculum.

This study highlights that teaching staff have an obligation to provide directive feedback to students that gives them the confidence to take positive action to enhance their learning. Tutors need to guide and motivate students using constructive feedback rather than just providing feedback to justify marks (Weaver 2006). Feedback should be a constructively aligned component of teaching and learning processes and needs to be explicitly and clearly stated within the curriculum. This can create a very powerful and effective learning environment (Vardi, 2012). The majority of students entering higher education, however, do not possess strategies to act on feedback that teaching staff provide (Burke 2009). As teachers, it is therefore our responsibility to ensure that the students can identify when feedback is given and how they can use it to improve and achieve learning outcomes within their units of study. Harden and Laidlaw (2013) suggest that

effective learning is underpinned by providing feedback that reinforces and clarifies expectations as well as guides and corrects to improve performance. Similarly, Higgins et al. (2002) indicate that student errors or misconceptions need to be explained within the feedback given, to enable students to improve. This is reflected in the comment of one respondent who felt that the feedback was inadequate, as there was "*no indication of what could have made it better*". It cannot be assumed that all academic staff teaching the students surveyed in this study had an adequate understanding of feedback as an academic process. Thus the role of educating both staff and students with respect to feedback processes is crucial.

Specific Implications of the Study

This study has provided valuable insight into how first- and second-year nursing, education and health-sciences students at the University of Tasmania perceive feedback, in contrast to previous literature, which has focused predominantly on first- and final-year undergraduate or postgraduate student perceptions. As a result, this study has indicated that there exists a potential naivety (inability to recognise and use outcome-based feedback) among our student population with respect to the feedback process, despite their acknowledgement of the value of feedback to their learning. This naivety, in part, relates to the students' poor understanding of the spectrum of feedback, including different types of feedback and the effective feedback processes that may be embedded into the curriculum.

A key finding in this study was that almost two-thirds of students actively seek individual feedback from staff in addition to the formative and summative feedback they already receive, although there does exist a need to educate students with respect to the role of feedback in assessing their existing knowledge and advancing their learning. If students know how to interpret feedback, they may then be able to use it to provide positive learning outcomes. Within our study, students valued personalised feedback and felt unable to make positive use of generic comments applied to their work. This demonstrated a sometimes narrow view of feedback, including a lack of awareness of its holistic value to allow them to reflect on what they had learned, areas in which they need to improve and how they can assess this information themselves.

O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2008) suggest that giving individual, explicit feedback has limitations, and suggest that participation by students in a feedback community of practice may assist them in their development and understanding of both pedagogic and social processes. This joint collaboration between students and educators suggests an area of future research that could increase student awareness and understanding, inform staff in a more meaningful manner and provide outcomes that are more student-centred. Robinson, Pope and Holyoak (2013) also highlight the need for future research with respect to managing students' and staff members' expectations of the role of feedback, particularly with respect to staff tending to view feedback as a starting point and students viewing it as a diagnostic tool that provides all answers to subsequent improvement. This supports the outcomes of this study, which highlights that teaching staff need to be supported, through the provision of workshops and seminars, to provide an effective feedback process within their learning and teaching practices. In line with other studies, we have therefore successfully highlighted the importance of student and staff awareness with respect to the value and role of feedback within the learning and teaching paradigm in higher education.

Educating and evaluating students in their commencing semester about the importance of feedback in academia and highlighting and addressing any misconceptions students and staff may have

about its purposes would be a valuable and necessary activity within any higher-education curriculum. Simultaneous education of teaching staff would further enhance the value of feedback in the learning and teaching process, promoting its constructive alignment to learning. Determining the effect of these embedded activities on staff and student perceptions of feedback would be of value, as the perceptions of feedback in this study are affected by students' feedback experiences in multiple units of study, in which feedback is not explicitly taught. The quality of learning and teaching would be enhanced if these relational aspects in any future studies were investigated to enable staff to improve teaching practices in their discipline area.

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Appendix A. Survey Questions Used in the Study

List all possible forms of feedback that you receive in any of your units (e.g. essays, workshops,

exams)
In which learning activities in your units do you think feedback should be given?

Think about an example of feedback given to you within the university, and please comment on:
 	
    a)   Type of assessment (e.g. MCQ, essay, exam)
    b)   Its timeliness
    c)   Its delivery
    d)   Whether it was helpful, and
    e)   How did you use it for learning

Do you actively seek feedback? Yes/No. If the answer is yes, can you explain how? If no, can you tell us why?