Assessment Feedback: What Do Students Want and Need?

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Abstract

This study reports on a school-wide project conducted in a UK higher education institution with the aim of informing enhancements to assessment feedback processes within the institution. Data were collected using online questionnaires (n = 127) and semi-structured interviews (n = 20). Participants were undergraduate students (from 9 programmes) and postgraduate students (from 21 programmes) from the Education Faculty. Qualitative data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis, while quantitative data were processed by frequency analysis. Findings indicate that students valued written feedback more than other forms of feedback. Regarding effective feedback, students attached considerable importance to specificity, consistency, and developmental orientation of assessment feedback. The findings also contribute to a discussion of feedback literacy by offering some potential approaches to improving students' strategies for understanding and capitalising on feedback, including offering chances for students to have collective and live communication about the given feedback. Findings also reveal the tension between students' high expectations of assessment feedback and the time allocated by institutions to marking within the staff workload tariff, and the sufficiency of this time for the creation of high-quality feedback.

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Introduction

Assessment feedback is widely considered as a vital element in supporting students through academia by providing scaffolding and facilitation to improve their academic performance and abilities (Boud & Molloy, 2013; To, 2016). Despite a continued growth in interest of the topic, the understanding of how to provide assessment feedback is an on-going process and remains an unresolved issue (Carless, 2015). Particularly, the discussion of effective feedback has been gaining momentum in recent years, although the effectiveness of feedback is still a contentious topic and perceptions may vary significantly depending on whose perspective is taken – teachers' or students' (Price et al., 2010). From students' viewpoints, many studies have collected evidence showing that specific, consistent, and developmental feedback is beneficial for learners' short-term academic improvement and long-term personal development (Barker & Pinard, 2014; Dawson et al., 2019; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Li & De Luca, 2014; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Price et al., 2010; Small & Attree, 2016). Compared with the rich body of literature concerning effective feedback, limited research has been conducted to explore potential measures to achieve the effectiveness of assessment feedback. The current study, from students' perspective, adds to the existing literature with more concrete evidence in this regard and potential approaches to improving the assessment feedback process.

Effective Feedback

Within education, feedback denotes the exchange of information from teacher to students about their work (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015; To, 2016). In addition to the functions of correction and reinforcement (Price et al., 2010), feedback informs students of the aspects in which they can improve their academic performance and abilities (Sadler, 2014). Rather than a one-way communication, feedback should be a dialogic process (Macleod et al., 2020), which begins with both the student and the educator sharing an understanding of what they expect from each other (Dawson et al., 2018). This dialogic communication is important because not all students necessarily require the same means for receiving feedback, and feedback alone is not always sufficient to improve academic abilities (Evans, 2013). In line with this contention, Carless and Boud (2018) hold that having meta-dialogue between teachers and students about strategies and procedures of assessment, rather than focusing on specific issues arising from the work, could improve student feedback literacy. The concept of student feedback literacy was first introduced by Sutton (2012), and defined by Carless and Boud (2018) as 'the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies' (p. 1316). Within the new feedback paradigm, feedback literacy is not only about feedback literate students, but also about feedback literate teachers (de Kleijn, 2023; Nieminen & Carless, 2023). Student agency, the shared responsibilities, and the interplay between student and teacher feedback literacy are highlighted in recent discussions of feedback literacy. While student feedback literacy mainly deals with seeking and utilising feedback, and developing the capacities to make academic judgements about feedback, teacher feedback literacy involves designing and managing assessment systems to promote student feedback literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2023).

In the past two decades, features of effective feedback have been under ongoing discussion and scrutiny. First, specificity significantly influences the effectiveness of feedback (Shute, 2008). For

instance, To (2016) reported that insufficient explanation of criteria and standards for feedback was a potential reason for ineffective practice of feedback. Consistency, which reflects the fairness and transparency of marking, is another essential feature that determines how effective students perceive feedback to be. However, the difficulty of achieving consistency in giving feedback is that even if there are standardised criteria to follow, interpretations of the shared criteria cannot be completely consistent (Bloxham et al., 2016). Moreover, feedback that enables *growth* is regarded as conducive to efficacy of feedback. Hounsell (2007) put forward the notion of *sustainability of feedback* which prepares students to learn prospectively and utilise the skills within and beyond education. He claimed that the intent for sustainable feedback is to have long-term benefits that continue over time. More specifically, Dunworth and Sanchez (2016) used the term *transformational feedback* to emphasise the functions of feedback regarding reflection, understanding, academic performance, and learning autonomy. Similarly, Price and colleagues (2010) hold that feedback with longitudinal development orientations is beneficial for students' independent thinking, reflective and autonomous learning.

It is important to note that while the discussion about strategies for giving effective feedback is gaining currency, a paucity of literature has addressed how institutions attach value and allocate workload tariffs for marking and offering feedback. This is an important topic for discussion because if staff do not have the time, how can they be expected to provide high-quality feedback? The current study adds to this discussion with some students' perceptions.

Students' Perspectives of Effective Feedback

An important question regarding the effectiveness of feedback is who makes the judgement. In other words, teachers and students may give disparate answers as to factors that influence the effectiveness of feedback (Price et at., 2010). This section will now discuss several studies which specifically explored students' perceptions of effective feedback. Lizzio and Wilson's (2008) research, conducted in Australia, involved 57 students in the first study (which identified criteria for effective feedback) and 277 students in the second study (which explored students' perceptions of effective feedback following the identified criteria). Among the four criteria generated from undergraduate students' perceptions of helpful feedback – *encouragement, depthful feedback, developmental focus*, and *justice* – students attached most importance to developmental feedback in determining the effectiveness of assessment. Also in Australia, Small and Attree (2016) interviewed 46 undergraduate students and found that students preferred 'clear and instructive' feedback (p. 2078). However, due to power imbalance in giving/receiving feedback and lack of academic discourse knowledge, when students encountered difficulty in understanding feedback, they did not take the initiative to ask for clarification. Barker and Pinard's (2014) research involved both undergraduate and postgraduate students' (n=29) evaluation of feedback from three courses in a UK university. One major finding was students' recognition of *iterative feedback* which emphasised feedback loop and student acting on previous feedback to make further improvement. Also in a UK university, Macleod et al. (2020) interviewed 27 postgraduate students from three courses and identified a potential tension between promoting dialogic feedback and independence of students. They also found that engagement with peer feedback seemed to be negatively related to active dialogic feedback with staff members.

Some recent studies examined both students' and teachers' perspectives on feedback. One such study by Li and De Luca (2014) reviewed 37 empirical studies concerning assessment feedback and identified undergraduate students' perspectives on written feedback, concluding that students expected written feedback to be 'timely, personal, explicable, criteria-referenced, objective, and applicable to further improvement' (p. 390). Dawson et al.'s (2019) study collected data from 400 students in two Australian universities and revealed that students preferred feedback that was usable (conducive to academic improvement and high grades), detailed, considerate of affect, and personalised. Dunworth and Sanchez's (2016) case study interviewed nine postgraduate students and six staff members from three courses in a UK university. They uncovered a certain degree of consistency between teachers and students on effective feedback. Findings were summarised into a conceptual model of quality staff-student feedback, characterised by *affective/interpersonal* (promoting confidence and motivation), *orientational* (clarifying task requirement), and *transformational* (enhancing autonomy) feedback. Price and colleagues (2010) conducted 35 semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey (n=776) with undergraduate and postgraduate students in three universities in the UK. Participants reported problems such as that feedback was limited to justification of grades, which deprived them of feed-forward opportunities. Students also expressed their expectations of explicit feedback. This study recognised the importance of developmental feedback whilst acknowledging the difficulty of giving such feedback in practice.

Summarising the findings of these studies, we may conclude that development-oriented, communication-involved, specific, and personalised feedback is favoured by students of different contexts. However, complication, or rather contradiction, is embedded in the discussions. For example, developmental feedback is comprehensively regarded as helpful, but how to achieve it remains elusive. Similarly, personalised feedback is preferred, but does it mean consistency in giving feedback is even harder to attain? Drawing on questions like these, the current study examines a range of students' perspectives (n=127), namely undergraduate (UG), postgraduate taught (PGT), and postgraduate research (PGR) students from 31 programmes, regarding their perceptions of effective feedback and potential approaches to achieving an effective mechanism of giving and receiving assessment feedback.

Research Questions

From the perspective of students, this study aims to seek answers to the following questions:

1. What are students' expectations and understanding relating to assessment feedback?
2. What do students like and dislike about the feedback they receive?
3. Do they understand the feedback they are given and what do they do if they do not understand how to implement it?

Method

Research Context

This qualitative study was conducted in a higher education institution in the UK to understand students' experiences, perceptions, and expectations of assessment feedback, with the intention of using this new knowledge to review and improve the feedback and to build student feedback literacy, thus serving as research for social purpose (Blaikie, 2010). Having implemented various approaches to enhancing assessment feedback over the past few years in the faculty where the project was conducted, this project aimed to work in tandem with students to explore explicitly what they expect from feedback, and how staff might best fulfil those expectations and/or look to positively redress student expectations. Through this project we sought to make formative and summative feedback more useful, constructive, accessible and meaningful to students, thus make the research inform change to action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Ethical approval was granted by the institution and the research conformed to British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical standards. All participants gave informed consent before continuing with the study. The research team comprised one full-time member of staff and two part-time PGR research assistants from the faculty in which the research was located.

Participants

All students enrolled on an undergraduate or postgraduate course within the faculty were eligible to participate, and they were contacted through faculty communication channels with an invitation letter and an introduction to the purpose of this project. To ensure equity and inclusion, no students were excluded by any criteria in the participant recruitment process. In total, 127 students from 9 out of the 10 UG programmes and from all 21 PG programmes completed the survey, with 20 of them from 2 UG programmes and 9 PG programmes participating in an online semi-structured interview (see details in Table 1). Among the 127 undergraduate respondents, students of year-one, year-two, year-three, and year-four respectively took up 33%, 21%, 33%, and 12%. While there were fewer UG participants than PG participants especially in the interview, 90% of UG programmes and 100% of PG programmes were represented in the survey. The underrepresentation of the undergraduate voice in interviews was a bit disappointing. That being the case, careful reflexivity at the analysis, findings and reporting stages was necessary to ensure that key themes and findings acknowledged and reflected the dominance of the PG voice.

Data Collection and Analysis

As the research aims to investigate perspectives, experiences and understanding, a combination of semi-structured survey and semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate way to gather the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Surveys were used in order to give every student in the faculty the opportunity to participate, should they wish. In addition to demographic questions, the questionnaire consisted of four multiple-choice questions (relating to students' perceptions of feedback) and five open-ended questions (relating to students' suggestions and expectations of feedback). At the end of the questionnaire, respondents opted in or out of an interview. It was then intended to interview 10 UG and 10 PG students to get a more detailed understanding of the students' perspectives. Time and funding constraints prevented a larger interview sample from

being possible. However, as UG students were hard to recruit, the final interview sample comprised 3 UG students and 17 PG students. Surveys were designed and distributed through an online platform in January while semi-structured interviews were conducted on a secure online platform in March 2022. The timing was so that all students had received written assessment feedback prior to participating. The interviews produced meaningful, rich data through interesting and free-flowing conversations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). All interviews were transcribed and digitally recorded through a secure platform and the data was analysed independently by two researchers.

Table 1: Numbers and percentages of UG and PG participants and programmes

		Survey		Interview	
	Total No. of students	Participating students	Percentage	Participating students	Percentage
UG	900	36	4%	3	0.3%
	Total No. of programmes	Participating programmes		Participating programmes	
	10	9	90%	2	20%
		Survey		Interview	
	Total No. of students	Participating students	Percentage	Participating students	Percentage
PG	2000	91	5%	36	1.8%
	Total No. of programmes	Participating programmes		Participating programmes	
	21	21	100%	9	43%

Thematic analysis was adopted for the analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). First, each research assistant analysed half of the interview transcripts and answers to the open-ended questions of the survey, highlighting initial codes and separately keeping an analytic memo. At this stage, some essential codes emerged, such as *specific, consistent*, and *developmental feedback*, and *Q&A sessions/dialogues for feedback clarification*, which were used as reference for the next round of data analysis. Following that, the two research assistants identified emergent themes across the interview transcripts and qualitative data from the survey. At the end of this stage, several key themes were developed including *general views of assessment feedback*, *preferred feedback features*, *attitudes toward existing feedback systems (positive and negative)* and *suggestions for further improvement*. In addition to this, frequency analysis was used for the more quantitative questions within the survey to substantiate or give context to the qualitative findings. In the whole process of data analysis, weekly team discussion was held to achieve consensus among all researchers, which in a sense enhanced the transparency and trustworthiness of this qualitative study (Nowell et al., 2017).

Findings

In this section, 20 interview participants were coded as P1-P20, while survey respondents were coded with the chronological number of their responses. For example, S1 refers to the first respondent in the survey.

Students' General Views of Feedback

Table 2. Students' perceptions of feedback purposes (survey data)

Purpose of feedback	UG students (n=36)	%	PG students (n=91)	%	Total (n=127)	%
To be a more independent learner/researcher	13	36	52	57	65	51
To gain a higher mark	15	42	21	23	36	28
Other	8	21	18	20	26	20

Data from the survey indicate that most respondents perceived that the purpose of feedback was to improve academic abilities and autonomous learning. A further 28% held the view that feedback helped them gain higher marks in future assignments. One fifth of the respondents explained their understandings of feedback. For example, 'feedback should highlight the students' area of relative strength as well as highlighting areas for progression and constructively challenge students' clarity of thought, argumentation, crucial skills, and organisation of ideas' (S20). More succinct than this, (feedback helps) 'sharpen future analysis and enhance degree of criticality' (S25). From a wider perspective, one student believed feedback could 'improve the quality and content of work which could be useful for society' (S12).

Interviewees' general understanding could be summarised as feedback helped students be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in academic performance, while broadening or deepening understanding and promoting learning. In a broader sense, a PG student characterised feedback as 'assessing, developing, and improving' (P11). Interestingly, she used a metaphor to indicate the importance of feedback: 'Feedback is sometimes like a present – it's something that somebody gives you because they care or they want you to do better' (P11). Another interesting interpretation of feedback was *miao* (which approximates 'wonder' in Chinese):

> *When I read the feedback for the first time, I was only able to understand it literarily. For example, if the comment is 'coherence needs improving', I might take it as a reminder to improve transitional words. But later, I realised there is difference between eastern and western logic…I need to switch my logic of thinking to the western mode. By using miao I mean we need to read feedback many times to achieve a deeper understanding of it.* (P13)

Table 3

Students' perceptions of 'most useful feedback' in supporting learning (survey data)

Type of feedback	UG students (n=36)	%	PG students (n=91)	%	Total (n=127)	%
Verbal feedback	16	44	48	53	64	50
Written feedback	31	86	80	88	111	87
Mid-term feedforward	10	28	29	32	39	31
Assignment feedback	27	75	58	64	85	67
Peer feedback	2	6	18	20	20	16
Group feedback	2	6	14	15	16	13

According to the survey data, written feedback (87%) and verbal feedback (51%) were both valued as helpful for students' learning. One said: 'The written feedback makes it easy to look back on from time to time to gauge on the areas that I need to keep working on' (S29). Written feedback could be even more important for international students. One PG student revealed: 'I'm an international student, so probably language (of the feedback) also is a big factor that makes me feel difficult…I usually use Google Translate first, also I will talk with my course mates' (S72). Some students perceived verbal feedback as supplementary to written feedback: 'If typing feedback up is time-consuming, allowing faculty members to provide feedback verbally and record them could be an alternative way' (S42). Similarly, another student pointed out the benefits of having a combination of both:

> *I would have liked some verbal feedback as well as the very short written feedback. We have to wait a long time to get the feedback and there is very little of it. As we are learning from home much of the time, everything can feel quite impersonal and the tone of the written feedback for my second assignment felt very abrupt.* (S80)

There was a slight discrepancy between the survey result and findings from the interviews regarding the usefulness of formative feedback (including mid-term feedforward). The survey results show that more students attached greater importance to assignment feedback (83%) than mid-term feedforward (38%). One PG student held that:

> *There is no point in giving assignment feedback if there is only one assignment. A whole course should have at least two summative assignments in order to help students to understand the mechanism of UK's evaluation system before submitting the last assignment.* (S71)

In the interviews, however, some participants mentioned that formative feedback was important and helpful, especially when it was oriented to the final assignment (P1 and P2), because it gave them more of an understanding of where to improve and 'to be more successful with the summative assignment' (P17). One stated the following reason: 'formative feedback gives us a type of scaffolding and deepens our understanding of a specific field or topic. However, summative feedback just tells us whether we've met the criteria or standard' (P10).

In comparison, peer feedback and group feedback were less valued, especially for UG students. One UG respondent gave the reason: 'peer feedback can often lead to confusion – unsure if some points are relevant (or to what extent) to yourself' (S79). However, a PG student expressed preference for these two types of feedback:

> I have not experienced peer feedback during this course, but I would be interested in that. Another mechanism which I experienced during my BA in the Netherlands was group marking of an assignment together with a tutor – this gave us a chance to delve into the marking criteria in depth with tutor support and cemented our understanding of what was required to perform well. (S116)

In sum, while students highly valued feedback in relation to their studies and life, they demonstrated differing preferences for specific types of feedback as helpful tools for their future academic engagement.

Preferred Features of Feedback

Specificity
Quite a few interview participants held the view that general feedback did not contribute to their further understanding. Rather, they preferred specific feedback which clarified where and how to make improvement (P1), and they thought the more detailed the feedback was, the more helpful it was (P2). Specificity of feedback could also be interpreted as clarification of learning outcomes and assignment requirements, as one PG student expected: 'If there was a session at the beginning of the year where not only the individual learning outcomes but how it's marked in each band was clarified, that would be very helpful' (P9). For those who got a low mark in an assignment, they had even higher expectations of 'longer and more detailed feedback' (P2). Compared with copy-and-paste feedback which was in line with the rubrics or marking criteria, students preferred personalised and in-depth feedback that allowed them to identify areas for improvement (P3). Referring to the former, a PG student commented: 'It seems to have been done as a tick box like they have to get this done as opposed to with the intention of being something that could help us move forward' (P11).

Similarly, the survey results display a strong dislike of general feedback and a marked preference for specific feedback. One participant felt quite negative: 'I try and glean anything that tangibly speaks to areas to improve. Most feedback has been somewhat esoteric and not useful for improving' (S94). Being more specific, another participant suggested: 'Make sure that what feedback provides is critical and doesn't lead us to believe things are fine when there is still scope for large improvement' (S112). Meanwhile, specific feedback was well accepted: 'Some markers are taking a lot of care to make very specific and useful comments, often in the document itself. This is akin to academic reviews for publication and so very helpful' (S56).

Consistency
Another key feature of effective feedback many participants foregrounded was consistency. One interviewee said: 'I don't want to see some feedback is quite long while some is rather short' (P2). Inconsistency also emerged as an issue in more detailed aspects. For example, some felt that 'there isn't a uniform understanding about what academic writing looks like in terms of quote usage and first person versus third person writing – different markers demonstrated different

preferences' (P9). Very similarly, another participant stated that 'I've found different tutors have different marking styles' (P14). Inconsistency in marking could cause confusion and uncertainty for students, as one revealed:

> *Things that I was picked up for in the first assignment I was then downgraded for in the second essay, which didn't make sense because for one I got a B and the other I got a D. I feel confused as to how to go forward with my next assignments now because I'm not sure what they're looking for.* (P6)

In the survey, one PG student provided a very detailed explanation followed by a constructive suggestion:

> *It did appear that sometimes the feedforward we received was dependant on the person providing the feedback rather than the student. Last semester my tutor repeatedly gave myself (and others they supervised) feedback on one particular aspect of our writing, whereas others in my class never received any feedback on that aspect at all. Seen in isolation there was nothing wrong with the comments or the feedback, but I suspect that a pattern would have quickly emerged had a collection of their feedback for different students been reviewed side by side. So perhaps reviewing a whole set of one tutor's feedback every now and then would be helpful to identify aspects that they tend to focus on or don't focus on.* (S110)

Developmental orientation

A narrow understanding of developmental feedback is that it can be used by students to plan for the next assignment. One UG student provided such details in the survey: 'I compare the feedback from one assignment against the marking criteria for the next to help me see which aspects of the assignment will need more attention' (S31).

Interview data indicate that high achievers seemed to put more emphasis on developmental feedback. One PG student who was a native English speaker and got A-band marks in most of her courses commented on the summative assessment feedback as 'a backward-looking exercise rather than a developmental exercise' (P9). Regarding formative feedback, she gave a similar comment: 'I don't feel it's really that additive in terms of moving me forward' (P9). She added: 'For me it's not really about where I am; it's about I want to be continually improving' (P9). A part-time PG student who was also a native English speaker expressed some similar opinions:

> *In my view, unless it's 100%, there is a place for improvement. And if I can't be shown where those improvements lie, then the feedback is generally not very useful…Most of my concern with feedback is how to get further…the course ends, and the student-lecturer relationship ends, but the idea of learning shouldn't. We shouldn't be thinking that ever ends, so I feel like all feedback should have this underlying platform that inspires us to keep going and gives us direction to do that.* (P19)

Survey data reflect some similar expectations of developmental feedback. One stated: 'Sometimes I've had comments like "this was good, at times excellent" but I'm not always clear as to what more I could have done to achieve "excellent" status' (S95).

Students' Suggestions for a More Effective Feedback Mechanism

Students expressed their expectations of consistent, detailed, and constructive feedback; however, at the same time, they did not want to 'exploit' tutors (P13), with some participants demonstrating awareness that each marker was allocated a limited time to mark each essay. One participant revealed in the survey: 'from my recollection, marking is set at an unrealistic standard (per student/assignment) in terms of the time it takes' (S57). There was some exaggeration on marking allocation times within one interview, but the sentiment was valuable: 'it's not fair to criticise people who are trying to mark a very long paper in 10 minutes' (P9). Similarly, another said: 'I know teachers are quite busy, so it's impossible to ask them to give very detailed feedback to every student' (P13). In line with this, one student tentatively asked the question: 'Can I ask the university to raise teachers' salaries?...I know some tutors are responsible for a couple of workshops, each with 10 to 20 students…and they have their research to do…' (P13). Time allocation for marking was also mentioned in the survey. For instance, one respondent advocated: 'First and foremost, give those who give feedback more time per student/per assignment' (S41).

For other participants, raising efficiency of giving feedback rather than staff's salaries seemed to be more feasible and achievable. Giving one-to-one feedback in a collective manner was recognised by some students as 'efficient'. One PG student said:

> *Some teachers gathered all the students and gave individual feedback, which means we could hear what feedback the teacher gave others. Meanwhile, we could learn about other students' ideas. In this way, the efficiency and dimension of giving feedback was increased.* (P10)

Another strong recommendation participants made in the interviews and survey was that the course team should provide opportunities for clarifying comments after releasing the feedback. Interviewees suggested that the course organiser should 'hold an online meeting after the feedback was given' to enable students to 'clarify their confusion' (P2). Corroborating this opinion, some gave their reasons: 'If we write emails to tutors for such a purpose, most probably, they will not reply. It seems the assignment is completed when we get feedback from the tutors' (P10); 'I think having a written bit of paper saying you need to work on this, this, and this, doesn't work for me. I would rather have a meeting with the person who marked it to talk through it' (P15). In the survey, similar requests were made: 'there needs to be mechanisms where the student can openly query a feedback comment for a written assignment' (S96); 'Q&A or live chat may be better' (S86). One respondent provided a detailed reason:

> *I think being able to have a discussion with a staff member about the feedback would be very helpful; although this is probably unrealistic due to time constraints; giving the option to students to follow-up on written feedback with a discussion could be a good compromise.* (S77)

Discussion

Students' Perceptions of Effective Feedback

In the findings of the current study, a recurring feature of effective feedback was specificity. Akin to the findings of Dawson et al.'s (2019) study, specificity of feedback was regarded as

'personalised' feedback and 'useful' because such feedback was more helpful for students to gain higher marks in future assignments. Rather than narrowly interpreting specificity as offering specific and detailed feedback, it also necessitates clarifying the expectations of both teachers and students in relation to assignment requirements (Dawson et al., 2018). One PG student in the interview explicitly expressed such an expectation – to gain an elaborate explanation of the required learning outcomes as early as possible in the course learning. This finding mirrors To's (2016) claim that inadequate explanation of assessment criteria and requirements may result in ineffective feedback. Therefore, giving *orientational* assessment instructions is beneficial for students to acquire informed learning (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016).

Regarding consistency in offering feedback, this study collected some evidence which not only demonstrated the importance of consistency but also the considerable difficulty it involved. Aligned with Bloxham et al.'s (2016) assumption that interpretations of assessment criteria may not be consistent even though the criteria have been standardised, the current study gathered some confirming data. Some students appreciated the rubrics that teachers followed when giving marks and attendant feedback; meanwhile, quite a few participants disclosed various forms of inconsistency in assessment feedback, which seemed to be exceedingly difficult to resolve. One possible approach to improving consistency of feedback, as one student shared in the interview and another one suggested in the survey, was that teachers could provide feedback in a collective manner, which enabled all the students (if they wanted) to gain knowledge about how the teacher commented on their peers' works. This might be more feasible for offering formative feedback, but would undoubtedly contribute to the transparency of giving feedback. However, to protect students' privacy and related issues, teachers need to confirm with each participating student before inviting them to a collective feedback session.

Another recurring theme in the findings of the present study is the developmental orientation of feedback, or the *growth* element of feedback (Hounsell, 2007). In other words, it was highly valued by some students that feedback could nurture their growth not only in the academic realm but also for their future development beyond education. Adding to the existing literature which emphasises the significance of developmental feedback from different perspectives (e.g., Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Li & De Luca, 2014; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Price et al., 2010), the current study found that high achievers seemed to have even stronger needs for developmental feedback which clarified areas for improvement and provided facilitating instruments to shorten the gap. It is important to note, though, such expectations were directly linked to their marks. As one participant complained, they did not want to hear their work was excellent; rather, they hoped to increase capabilities for achieving 100% if that was the full mark. Relating to such dissatisfaction, another problem pointed out by several participants in this study was that some feedback was limited to justification of marks, which was also identified as incongruous with the intention of providing developmental feedback in Price and colleagues' (2010) study.

Exploring Ways to Achieve Effective Feedback

Findings in this study show that students expected the chance to clarify any confusion relating to the feedback they received, which is reflective of a need for dialogic feedback (Nicol, 2010). Macleod et al. (2020) argued that active dialogic feedback might limit students' engagement with other forms of feedback, while findings of our study show that students already engaged less with

other types of feedback: survey data from the current study revealed that peer feedback (16%) and group feedback (13%) were valued less compared with written feedback (87%) and assignment feedback (67%). The latter two in most cases were given by staff rather than peers. From another perspective, participants' need for dialogic interaction between staff and students confirms the notion that feedback alone is not sufficient to increase students' academic abilities because different students have different learning preferences and expectations of feedback (Evans, 2013). As suggested by participants in this study, it is conceivable that student feedback literacy could be enhanced through the provision of opportunities such as Q&A sessions or other forms of live discussion between staff and students about the released marks and feedback. Participants showed strong motivation to engage in such timely discussion of actual feedback. Such discussion might also contribute to a *meta-dialogue* (Carless & Boud, 2018) in which there is also focus on strategies involved in tackling assessment feedback. Students' suggestions corroborated the notion that student agency, shared responsibilities, and the mutual interactions between students and teachers in the development of feedback opportunities are the key elements of enabling effective feedback (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Furthermore, since this proposal involves a collective way of clarifying feedback-related confusion, it has the potential to help those students who lack the courage to contact staff for further help due to power relationship issues (Small & Attree, 2016).

An interesting finding of this study is some students' dilemma between the expectation of high-quality feedback and their awareness of time allocation for marking and giving feedback (i.e., staff were given little time to mark their work). In the survey and the interviews alike, participants raised the concern that they did not want to take up (or 'exploit' as a participant put) too much of their tutors' time although they wanted detailed and specific feedback. Similarly, several participants acknowledged that tutors had several other responsibilities, leaving them with little or no time to offer one-to-one session on feedback with each individual student. This leaves students with the sense that the institution does not value their work enough to give markers sufficient time to mark and write feedback. Thus, there is an apparent tension between the time allocated to tutors for marking and the desire by both staff and students for high-quality feedback (e.g., being specific, consistent, and developmental). Although scholars (e.g., Carless, 2022) have drawn attention to relevant issues, for example workload-friendly strategies, to our knowledge, this still remains a problem that has not been examined in empirical studies. Discussion about student as customer has been ongoing for many years (e.g., Bunce et al., 2017; Cuthbert, 2010; Nixon et al., 2018). Feedback, as a major factor contributing to student satisfaction (Maggs, 2014), merits institutions' greater attention and consideration regarding the value they place on staff's marking work and the assessment feedback process. We hope this could trigger further investigation and discussion in the research field.

Conclusion

This study collected students' perceptions of effective feedback and their suggestions for the improvement of assessment feedback mechanism. Three features stand out that characterise effective feedback, namely specificity, consistency, and developmental orientation. In a broad sense based on participants' interpretations, specificity denotes not only detailed and personalised feedback but also entails clarification of assessment requirements and evaluative criteria if applicable. Consistency in offering feedback was highlighted as central to the fairness

of the evaluation system. Albeit recognising the difficulty in achieving it, students made suggestions such as following standardised rubrics when giving feedback and providing (formative) feedback in a collective manner to enable students with such needs to gain a comprehensive view of teachers' comments and peers' ideas. Developmental feedback, as opposed to justification of marks, was highly valued by some students, especially those who demonstrated a relatively high level of academic achievement. To facilitate their continuous growth in academic pursuit, feedback was expected to provide directions for improvement and instruments to shorten the gap.

Regarding how to make the assessment feedback process more effective and efficient, students gave some constructive suggestions. Aligned with the notion of dialogic feedback (Macleod et al., 2020; Nicol, 2010), students expressed expectations of having the opportunities to communicate with tutors or course organisers about the given feedback to clarify any confusion. It is arguable that such interactions may also enhance students' feedback literacy through the meta-dialogue concerning feedback between teachers and students (Carless & Boud, 2018). The collective and live communication also helps alleviate negative effects on those who do not seek individual help due to the concern of power relationships (Small & Attree, 2016). Another important issue revealed by students was the low allocated workload tariff for marking. While demonstrating the awareness of it, several students explicitly or implicitly voiced their hope for the institution to raise the value of marking in terms of staff's payment or time allocation. From the perspective of student as customer, this is an issue that is worth further and close attention on the side of higher education institutions to increase student satisfaction.

The relatively small sample size equating to approximately 5% of the student population means that findings are not necessarily representative. There was never going to be a single homogeneous view of feedback. However, the rich data gathered from participating students provided sufficient information and insight into student perspectives for the faculty to begin conversations with all students about feedback and start to develop a shared understanding. Furthermore, it provided a starting point for programme teams' work to determine the needs and expectations of their students. Therefore, despite the sample size, the findings had potential to inform strategies for improvement and development regarding assessment feedback.

Conflict of Interest

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