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Enhancing Student Feedback Literacy through a Bonus Mark Incentive: Stimulating Student Action on Teacher Feedback

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Abstract

Feedback literacy relates to the ability to comprehend, use and benefit from information on one's past output to enhance future work. In higher education, students are required to undertake assessment tasks to 'pass' a unit. Completing these assessment tasks—leading to feedback from their teachers—is an important learning tool for university students. Yet, feedback literacy appears to be limited among university students. To contribute to the ongoing discussions on developing feedback literacy for students, the paper investigates the impact of a Bonus Mark Incentive on student feedback action and the key factors that drive or prevent such action. It does so by evaluating an assessment-design intervention in a first-year undergraduate unit involving a reward of up to a 3% bonus mark for implementing teacher feedback received in a previous essay. The findings indicate that bonus marks functioned as a strong extrinsic motivator of feedback action and appeared to support a scaffolding effect, while time pressure was the principal barrier. The paper concludes by discussing the empirical insights generated regarding student motivation, engagement with feedback and challenges associated with facilitating feedback uptake.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Bonus mark incentives can encourage students to take action on teacher feedback in sequential assessment tasks.
2. Structured opportunities to apply feedback can support a scaffolding effect that strengthens students' academic writing.
3. Time pressure remains a key barrier to feedback uptake, particularly for students with concurrent study, work and/or family commitments.
4. Requiring a brief written reflection can prompt more deliberate engagement with feedback.
5. Purposeful assessment design can create structured conditions that encourage student feedback action.

Keywords

feedback literacy, feedback action, assessment design, bonus mark, motivation

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Introduction

Feedback literacy relates to one's capability to read, understand and use written feedback received (Molloy et al., 2020; Sutton, 2012). In higher education, feedback is widely recognised as central to supporting learning (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Molloy et al., 2020). Students routinely receive feedback throughout their coursework, yet converting this information into action remains a persistent challenge, with teachers often experiencing difficulty encouraging students to engage with feedback (Carless & Winstone, 2023). Surveys of university students have also consistently revealed widespread student dissatisfaction with teacher feedback. Deeley et al. (2019, p. 385) have described this dissatisfaction as "a complex and multi-faceted, 'wicked' problem." Within this broader construct, students' ability to act on feedback is a key dimension of feedback literacy, reflecting their capacity to interpret, evaluate and apply feedback in ways that support ongoing learning (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Molloy et al., 2020).

Given these challenges, there is growing interest in approaches that encourage more active engagement with feedback. Incentives have been explored as one way to influence motivation, with research suggesting that extrinsic motivators—such as marks—can shape students' decisions to act on feedback, particularly when intrinsic motivation or confidence is limited (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Molloy et al., 2020; Winstone & Carless, 2019). However, little is known about how specific incentive structures operate in practice or how students perceive them.

Against this backdrop, this study examines a Bonus Mark Incentive implemented in a first-year undergraduate unit, in which students could earn up to a 3% bonus mark for implementing teacher feedback from a prior essay. The study addresses two research questions: (1) What is the impact of the Bonus Mark Incentive on student feedback action? and (2) What motivators and barriers shape students' feedback action? The Results and Discussion sections are each organised around the two research questions, examining first the incentive's impact on students' feedback action and then the motivators and barriers that shaped it. The paper concludes by considering the practical and theoretical implications of the findings.

Literature

Feedback: Definitions and Challenges

Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1315) define 'feedback' as "a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies." This definition emphasises students' active role in using information from multiple sources to improve future work. Feedback seeks to bridge the gap between the current performance level and the desired learning goal (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). However, feedback only achieves its purpose when it successfully influences the gap and has a tangible impact on student learning (Draper, 2009; Wiliam, 2011).

There are two prevalent views of feedback: cognitivist and socio-constructivist (Evans, 2013). The cognitivist perspective is more directive, whereas the socio-constructivist viewpoint emphasises dialogue and student agency. Socio-constructivist approaches, which dominate contemporary feedback scholarship, foreground dialogue and shared meaning-making (Archer, 2010; Carless et al., 2011).

Feedback from assessment tasks is a key learning mechanism for students. Yet, there are several issues related to feedback processes and outcomes. Carless and Winstone (2023, p. 150) note that feedback in higher education "has long been acknowledged as a challenging issue … across international contexts and disciplines." The *Student Experience Survey* is an annual survey of university students in Australia. The survey's 2022 report reveals a consistent trend of low student satisfaction with teacher feedback. Among all the 'Teaching Quality' indicators between 2019 and 2022, the item "Teachers commented on your work in ways that help you learn" received the lowest scores (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2023, p. 80). Likewise, the *National Student Survey*, the United Kingdom's equivalent survey, reveals a similar student sentiment. In both 2021 and 2022, among full-time students, "10. Feedback on my work has been timely" ranked among the five lowest-scoring of the survey's 27 questions in each of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and "11. I have received helpful comments on my work" among the eight lowest, with agreement on neither statement exceeding 70% in any nation (Office for Students, 2023). These trends highlight widespread student dissatisfaction with feedback processes in higher education. Nevertheless, Buckley (2021, p. 1016) cautions the need to interpret such dissatisfaction "with a pinch of salt" due to the emotive dimension of assessment. On the other hand, teachers often report frustration when their students exhibit limited engagement with their feedback (Price et al., 2011).

Student Feedback Literacy

Boud and Molloy (2013, p. 699) refer to student feedback in higher education as a "puzzling phenomenon." They highlight that feedback is riddled with many challenges created by a complex, intertwining framework of learners, coursework, learning milieu, disciplinary content and learning outcomes. Successful feedback processes, in which the teacher is typically seen as playing a central role (de Kleijn, 2023), require *shared responsibilities* between the student and the teacher, thus indicating the importance of feedback literacy for both students and teachers (Carless & Winstone, 2023; de Kleijn, 2023). Therefore, feedback literacy has two dimensions—*the student* and *the teacher*.

Student feedback literacy is defined by Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1316) as "the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies." It emphasises students' ability to interpret, evaluate and use feedback productively. De Kleijn (2023) similarly highlights students' responsibility to seek and make use of feedback.

Carless and Boud (2018) have developed a conceptual framework of student feedback literacy comprising four interrelated factors: 1) appreciating feedback, 2) making judgements, 3) managing affect and 4) taking action. They propose that a combination of the first three features enhances the likelihood of students 'taking action' to implement feedback on their subsequent work. Molloy et al. (2020) extend this into a seven-part framework, including committing to improvement, appreciating feedback, eliciting information, processing feedback, working with emotions, acknowledging feedback as a reciprocal process and enacting outcomes. Across these models, the capacity to take action is consistently positioned as the culminating feature of feedback literacy.

Teacher Feedback Literacy

Teacher feedback literacy refers to "the knowledge, expertise and dispositions to design feedback processes in ways which enable student uptake of feedback and seed the development of student feedback literacy" (Carless & Winstone, 2023, p. 153). Carless and Winstone (2023) outline three dimensions: design, relational and pragmatic. The design dimension concerns structuring assessment environments that support feedback uptake, aligning with Carless and Boud's (2018) emphasis on teachers' role in creating such environments. The relational dimension involves interpersonal and communicative aspects between teachers and students. The pragmatic dimension relates to institutional and disciplinary constraints. Carless and Winstone (2023) emphasise the interplay between teacher and student feedback literacy, noting that teacher practices shape students' opportunities to appreciate feedback, refine judgements and take action. This interplay is central to the present study, which examines how an assessment-design intervention may support student feedback literacy.

Student Engagement with Feedback

Student engagement with feedback is crucial to effective feedback uptake (Winstone et al., 2017). However, engagement is often limited due to transmission-based, teacher-centred feedback approaches that place little emphasis on student responsibility (Winstone & Carless, 2019). Carless (2015) contrasts this feedback paradigm with dialogic approaches that position feedback as a process rather than a product. Feedback Intervention Theory (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) also offers insight into why students vary in their engagement with feedback. The theory suggests that feedback affects performance by directing students' attention. When feedback draws attention to the task—what needs to be improved and how—performance tends to improve. When feedback shifts attention toward the self, such as feelings of pressure or self-evaluation, performance can decline. This helps explain why feedback linked to clear performance goals may encourage students to focus more closely on task requirements and engage more actively with comments.

Recent studies have explored interventions aimed at strengthening feedback engagement. Di Zhang et al. (2024) found that combined feedback across multiple tasks improved students' appreciation of feedback and affective management, though not their judgement-making or action. They argue for scaffolding and varied feedback types to help students recognise feedback usefulness. In To's (2022) study, the author and two teaching colleagues implemented a two-stage, student-centred feedback mechanism involving peer review, self-assessment and audio-based teacher responses. This approach enhanced students' feedback responsibility, evaluative judgement and psychological safety. These studies highlight the potential of structured, dialogic and scaffolded feedback processes to promote deeper engagement.

Taken together, the literature highlights emerging concepts in feedback literacy and persistent challenges in feedback processes. While frameworks of student and teacher feedback literacy consistently position taking action as the culmination of effective engagement with feedback, comparatively little empirical attention has been given to how specific assessment-design incentives might prompt students to act on feedback, or to how students themselves experience such incentives. The present study addresses this gap.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to evaluate the Bonus Mark Incentive in a single offering of a first-year unit. Quantitative data on students' marks, incentive participation and feedback-viewing activity were drawn from the unit's assessment records for Trimester 1, 2022, and were complemented by an anonymous survey, administered after the trimester, that combined closed-ended Likert-scale items with open-ended questions. This design enabled the study to examine both the extent of students' feedback action and the reasons underpinning it. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set out by Purvis and Crawford (2024), with approval from the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee (HE22-143, approved 24 October 2022).

The incentive was implemented at the University of New England (UNE), Australia. UNE is a regional university that has provided distance education for over 70 years, catering to regional and remote students through its emphasis on online teaching delivery. According to UNE's (2026, p. 10) 2025 Annual Report, the student cohort is predominantly online (85%), with a majority of female students (69%) and a substantial proportion from low socio-economic backgrounds (19%).

The Bonus Mark Incentive was implemented in *Introduction to Planning History and Theory* (GEPL121), a first-year unit within the Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning (BURP) at UNE, in Trimester 1, 2022 (February–May). In this trimester, 45 students were enrolled in the unit, comprising 43 online students and 2 on-campus students. The majority of students in the unit, and in the broader BURP cohort, are mature-age career-changers, typically in their late 20s to mid-40s, with a smaller number in their 50s and 60s. Most of these students work full-time and undertake their studies part-time, a long-standing pattern in the BURP cohort. As a result, they are often time-poor, balancing study with employment and, in many cases, family responsibilities. A minority of recent high-school graduates also enter the BURP course. Given that most students study online, with limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction, assessment feedback plays a particularly important role in supporting positive learning outcomes in the unit.

GEPL121 is designed to develop students' academic research and writing skills through a sequence of essay-based assessment tasks. The essays were evaluated holistically against five criteria: 1) quality of the response to the essay question, 2) research undertaken, 3) essay structure, 4) visual presentation and 5) accuracy of in-text and reference-list citations. These criteria provided the basis for the feedback students received and therefore shaped the aspects of their work they were invited to improve in subsequent submissions. The unit's assessment tasks to which the incentive applied comprised three major essays, each worth up to 30% of each student's final unit mark. The incentive, available in two rounds for the second and third essays, offered a potential bonus mark of up to 3% for incorporating feedback from the previous essay. Participation in the incentive was optional across both essays. To claim the bonus mark, students were required to furnish a one-to-two-paragraph written reflection outlining their integration of feedback at the end of their essay. The bonus mark reward, distributed in whole numbers ranging from 1% to 3%, was based on the extent to which each student had considered and implemented the previous essay's feedback in their written reflection and the submitted essay. No bonus mark was awarded if no written explanation was provided, even if feedback had been addressed. The

bonus mark applied only to the essay accompanied by a written reflection and not retrospectively to the previous essay. With the bonus mark, the maximum attainable mark for the second and third essays was 103%, although none of the graded essays exceeded 100% in their final marks.

Participants

Of the 45 students enrolled in the unit, 39 remained enrolled throughout the trimester and submitted at least two of the three essays (N = 39). These students were eligible to participate in at least one round of the Bonus Mark Incentive and therefore formed the analytic sample for all quantitative analyses and the survey invitation pool.

Measures

To answer the first research question, "what is the impact of the Bonus Mark Incentive on student feedback action?", the study evaluated the extent of participation in the incentive and its impact. This evaluation involved reviewing two categories of data: 1) total marks and bonus marks awarded to the 39 incentive-eligible students across the three essays, and 2) students' feedback viewing activity. *Turnitin Feedback Studio*, the online portal for submitting and grading essays for the unit, was used to collect data on students' marks and whether they accessed the feedback provided on their essays.

To answer the second research question, "what motivators and barriers shape students' feedback action?", the study employed an anonymous online survey. The survey was purpose-designed for this study to explore students' experiences with the incentive and to identify the factors that motivated or hindered their feedback action.

The survey questionnaire first identified which group each respondent belonged to and then presented each group with a tailored set of questions designed to uncover the motivators and barriers associated with their feedback action or non-action. Respondents were categorised into three participation groups. Group 1 comprised respondents who fully participated in the incentive (i.e., implemented feedback and provided a written response in at least one essay); Group 2 comprised respondents who partially participated in the incentive (i.e., implemented feedback but did not include a written response in at least one essay); and Group 3 comprised respondents who did not participate in the incentive (i.e., did not implement feedback in any essay).

The survey comprised a combination of closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The questionnaire included five sections tailored to these participation groups. Section 1 identified respondents' participation status. Sections 2 and 3 contained group-specific items for partial and full participants, including Likert-scale questions on the influence of various motivators and barriers and open-ended items inviting elaboration on their experiences. Section 4 included parallel items for non-participants, focusing on barriers to feedback action. Section 5, completed by all respondents, asked about factors that might improve future feedback uptake and invited optional comments on the incentive and the feedback received. The full questionnaire is available from the author on request.

The closed-ended items asked students to rate the influence of various motivators (e.g., desire to learn, desire to improve writing skills, marks and the Bonus Mark Incentive) and barriers (e.g., time pressure, effort required and timeliness of feedback) on their engagement. The open-ended questions invited students to elaborate on their reasons for participating or not participating in the

incentive and to comment on the nature of the feedback received. Survey items referred to ‘assignments’, the term used with students in the unit; this term is therefore retained when reporting survey items and responses, while ‘assessment’ is used elsewhere in the article.

Procedure

The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and disseminated by email to the 39 incentive-eligible students. The survey was open for four weeks between 3 November and 1 December 2022. Of the 39 invited students, 23 responded to the survey (n = 23), yielding a response rate of 59%.

Analysis

All quantitative data from Turnitin and the survey were collated and analysed descriptively using Microsoft Excel. Given the small cohort size and the limited number of students in each participation group, inferential statistical tests were not appropriate. Small exploratory samples are best analysed descriptively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and inferential tests require adequate and reasonably balanced sample sizes to yield stable estimates (Field, 2024). Descriptive statistics were therefore used to summarise patterns in marks (including the incentive’s impact), incentive participation and students’ feedback-viewing activity among the 39 incentive-eligible students.

For the survey, the closed-ended Likert-scale items were analysed descriptively to identify the relative influence of different motivators and barriers across respondent groups. The open-ended responses were examined thematically to identify recurring patterns in students’ experiences of the incentive and their engagement with feedback. This combined descriptive and thematic approach aligns with the exploratory nature of the study and the small, context-specific sample, enabling the identification of factors shaping students’ feedback actions.

The author was the coordinator and teacher of the unit, designed the Bonus Mark Incentive and marked all essays during the study. This insider position provided detailed knowledge of the unit, its assessment design and its students, but it also meant that the author’s assumptions about feedback and assessment may have shaped the design of the study and the interpretation of its findings. To reduce the potential influence of the teacher–student relationship on responses, the survey was anonymous and was administered after the trimester had concluded. Because marking was undertaken by a single, non-anonymous assessor, comparisons of marks between participants and non-participants are interpreted with caution in the Discussion.

Results

Uptake and Impact of the Bonus Mark Incentive[1]

Table 1 shows the proportion of students who participated in the incentive, while Table 2 illustrates the proportion of students who viewed feedback on each of the three essays. Participation in the incentive was higher for the second essay than for the third, and all students who participated in the third round had also participated in the second. The proportion of students who viewed their

[1] All descriptive statistics in this subsection relate to students eligible for the incentive (N = 39), defined as those who submitted at least two of the three essays.

feedback declined across the three essays, with the largest decrease occurring between the second and third essays.

Table 1

Proportion of Students Who Participated in the Bonus Mark Incentive

Second Essay		Third Essay		Second and Third Essays	
n	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
25	64.10%	16	41.03%	16	41.03%

Table 2

Proportion of Students Who Viewed Feedback

First Essay		Second Essay		Third Essay	
n	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
33	84.62%	30	76.92%	21	53.85%

Notes. The data presented in the table were acquired from *Turnitin Feedback Studio*.

Table 3 summarises the marks awarded for the three essays. The average total mark across all eligible students increased from the first essay to the third. Students who participated in both rounds of the incentive recorded the largest increase, and their marks remained above their first-essay marks even when the bonus mark was excluded. In contrast, the average total mark of non-participants decreased for the second essay before partially recovering for the third.

Table 3

Total Marks and Bonus Marks Awarded Across the Three Essays

	First Essay	Second Essay	Third Essay
	All Students		
Average Total Mark	79.41%	80.95%	84.13%
Standard Deviation	8.62%	11.06%	11.37%
	Non-Participants in the Bonus Mark Incentive		
Average Total Mark	78.21%	73.21%	76.86%
Standard Deviation	7.75%	12.34%	12.39%
	Incentive Participants for the Second Essay		
Average Total Mark	77.22%	84%	82.56%
Standard Deviation	9.05%	8.31%	9.22%
Average Bonus Mark	N/A	3%	N/A
Average Total Mark without Bonus Mark	N/A	81%	N/A
	Incentive Participants for the Second Essay and Third Essays		
Average Total Mark	81.69%	86%	91.38%
Standard Deviation	9.10%	7.26%	6.48%
Average Bonus Mark	N/A	3%	2.75%
Average Total Mark without Bonus Mark	N/A	83%	88.63%

Profile of Survey Respondents

Table 4 illustrates the breakdown of the survey respondents by group. Most respondents belonged to Group 1, with four respondents in Group 2 and a single respondent in Group 3. The results for each respondent group are outlined below.

Table 4

Breakdown of Survey Respondents

Respondent Group	Group Explanation	n	%
Group 1	Full participation in the incentive in at least one essay	18	78
Group 2	Partial participation in the incentive in at least one essay	4	17
Group 3	No participation in the incentive in either essay	1	4
Total		23	100

Notes. Percentages relate to survey respondents (n = 23) and do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Group 1: Motivators for Full Participation

A total of 18 survey respondents fully participated in the Bonus Mark Incentive in at least one essay (n = 18). Sixteen of these respondents (89%) fully participated in the incentive in both essays. The motivators for these survey respondents' full participation and the motivators driving future implementation of teacher feedback are outlined below.

All Group 1 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the Bonus Mark Incentive had been a principal motivating factor for them to implement teacher feedback in at least one essay, with 72% of them expressing the latter sentiment. Table 5 ranks the relative influence of motivators for these survey respondents' full participation in the incentive.

Table 5

Relative Influence of Motivators for Full Participation in the Bonus Mark Incentive

Motivators		**Survey Results**											
Ranking	**Motivator**	**Score**		**Very Strong Influence**		**Strong Influence**		**Some Influence**		**Limited Influence**		**No Influence at All**	
		%	**(out of 90)**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
1	Desire to achieve a higher mark in the next assignment	96	86	14	78	4	22	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	The Bonus Mark Incentive	94	85	14	78	3	17	1	6	0	0	0	0
3	Desire to achieve an exceptional [unit] mark	91	82	11	61	6	33	1	6	0	0	0	0
4	Desire to improve academic writing skills	90	81	10	56	7	39	1	6	0	0	0	0
5	Desire to learn from assignment feedback	89	80	8	44	10	56	0	0	0	0	0	0

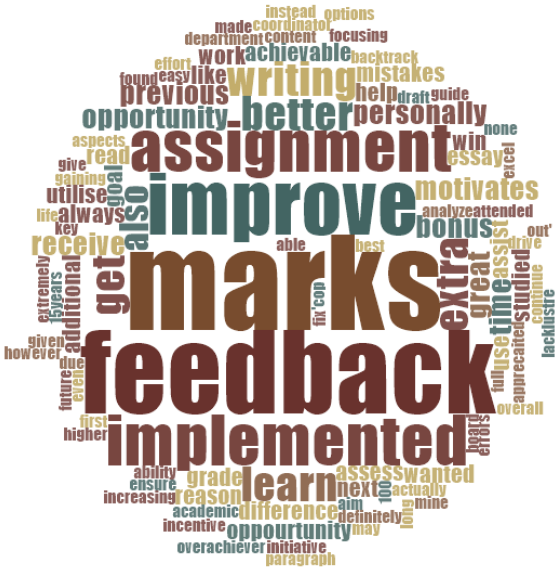
Notes. Percentages and scores in the table relate to Group 1 respondents (n = 18). The table summarises respondents' ratings of the relative influence of different motivators using a five-point Likert scale: 5 for 'very strong influence', 4 for 'strong influence', 3 for 'some influence', 2 for 'limited influence', and 1 for 'no influence'. Scores were calculated by multiplying the number of responses for each Likert category by its point value and summing these values.

Through two optional, open-ended questions, Group 1 respondents were asked to list the motivators for their full participation in the incentive. Across these questions, 21 written responses identifying motivators were received (n = 21) from 16 of the 18 Group 1 respondents (89%). Figure

1 illustrates a word cloud of the most common words associated with motivators for full participation.

Figure 1

Motivators for Full Participation in the Bonus Mark Incentive



Notes. The figure was created using the Word Frequency tool of NVivo 12 Plus for Windows. The query was run on the written responses provided to these open-ended items.

The three most frequent words across the 21 responses were ‘marks’, ‘feedback’ and ‘improve’, mentioned in 13, 9 and 8 responses, respectively. Thematic analysis of the written responses identified several motivators for full participation, reported below as proportions of the 16 Group 1 respondents whose written responses identified motivators (n = 16).

The most common motivator was the opportunity to achieve a higher mark. Consistent with Figure 1 and Table 5, 81% of these respondents identified the bonus mark, and the associated opportunity to gain a higher mark for an essay and the unit, as their primary motivator for full participation. Three respondents cited the potential of the bonus mark to help them achieve a High Distinction grade (awarded for a unit mark of at least 85%). Another expressed their excitement about being rewarded for addressing teacher feedback, noting that “an opportunity to receive feedback on assignments that will help improve my grades is extremely motivating.”

Developmental motivations were also evident. A quarter of respondents (25%) expressed a desire to learn from teacher feedback. One noted that “it was great to learn from my mistakes,” while others valued the opportunity “to learn from each feedback and use it as a guide to reflect on my ability to implement said feedback” and “to learn from my previous work and get extra marks for doing so.” The desire to improve academic writing skills was mentioned more often, by 44% of respondents. One wrote, “As a first-year student and not having studied for a long time, I also wanted to implement feedback to improve my assignment writing skills,” while another explained, “It has been 15 years since I have attended school, and [I] wish to improve my lacklustre academic

writing." A third noted that "having the incentive to write how I implemented the feedback definitely helped my writing."

Affective and interpersonal factors motivated a smaller number of respondents. Two cited affective factors: one referred to "the drive to excel in my studies," while another indicated that the bonus mark justified the time needed to engage with feedback, noting that it "was a great reason for me to … validate the time to properly analyze and assess the feedback I was given. It was a great reason to backtrack [before fully] focusing on my next assessment." Two others identified interpersonal factors as their principal motivator. One participated "[to ensure that the marking] effort undertaken by the [teacher] to give feedback was not put to waste," and the other wanted "to show the teacher how I have implemented [teacher] feedback … and also take it on board for future assignments."

Finally, some respondents were motivated by the ease of participation or the usefulness of the feedback itself. One described the incentive as a "win-win situation" in which higher marks could be easily attained, given that only "a paragraph or two" of written explanation was required, and another valued the "very easy additional marks to assist with my overall mark." For one respondent, the usefulness of the feedback was the primary motivator, as they had "found the feedback useful and wanted to utilise it."

Group 1: Motivators for Future Feedback Action

Table 6 ranks the relative influence of different motivators for implementing teacher feedback in the future among Group 1 respondents. Receiving assignment feedback earlier and a bonus mark greater than 3% were the most frequently selected motivators, while no respondent selected less comprehensive feedback.

Table 6

Relative Influence of Different Motivators for Future Implementation of Teacher Feedback Among Group 1 Respondents

Motivators		**Survey Results**	
Motivator	**Ranking**	**n**	**%**
Receiving assignment feedback earlier	1	11	61
A bonus mark greater than 3%	2	10	56
A later assignment due date	3	7	39
More constructive feedback	4	6	33
More comprehensive feedback	5	5	28
Less comprehensive feedback	6	0	0

Notes. Percentages in the table are based on Group 1 respondents (n = 18). Rankings reflect the number of respondents selecting each factor when asked which conditions would increase their likelihood of implementing feedback in future assignments.

Group 2: Motivators for Partial Participation

Four survey respondents fell under Group 2 due to their partial participation in the incentive in at least one essay. The motivators for their partial participation, barriers to full participation and motivators driving future implementation of teacher feedback are outlined below.

Table 7 ranks the relative influence of different motivators for Group 2 respondents' partial participation in the incentive. The desire to achieve a higher mark in the next assignment was the most influential motivator, followed jointly by the remaining three motivators. Asked to list any other motivators for implementing teacher feedback, one Group 2 respondent noted their desire "to improve communication skills through improved writing".

Table 7

Relative Influence of Motivators for Partial Participation in the Bonus Mark Incentive

Motivators		**Survey Results**											
Ranking	**Motivator**	**Score**		**Very Strong Influence**		**Strong Influence**		**Some Influence**		**Limited Influence**		**No Influence at All**	
		%	**(out of 20)**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
1	Desire to achieve a higher mark in the next assignment	85	17	1	25	3	75	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Desire to improve academic writing skills	70	14	1	25	2	50	0	0	0	0	1	25
2	Desire to learn from assignment feedback	70	14	1	25	1	25	1	25	1	25	0	0
2	Desire to achieve an exceptional [unit] mark	70	14	1	25	0	0	3	75	0	0	0	0

Notes. The table summarises Group 2 respondents' ratings of the relative influence of different motivators for implementing assignment feedback, and hence for partial participation in the incentive, using a five-point Likert scale. Percentages are based on Group 2 respondents (n = 4). Scores were calculated using the same approach described for Table 5. The maximum possible score for each motivator was 20.

Group 2: Barriers to Full Participation

Table 8 ranks the relative influence of the different barriers to full participation in the incentive among Group 2 respondents. Time pressure was the most influential barrier, followed by the timeliness of the feedback and the effort required to prepare a written response.

Table 8

Relative Influence of Barriers to Full Participation in the Bonus Mark Incentive

Barriers		Survey Results											
Ranking	Barrier	Score		Very Strong Influence		Strong Influence		Some Influence		Limited Influence		No Influence at All	
		%	(out of 20)	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1	Time pressure	90	18	3	75	0	0	1	25	0	0	0	0
2	Timeliness of the feedback	60	12	1	25	0	0	2	50	0	0	1	25
3	Effort required to prepare a response	50	10	0	0	1	25	1	25	1	25	1	25

Notes. The table summarises Group 2 respondents' ratings of the relative influence of different barriers to preparing a written response, and hence to full participation in the incentive. Scores were calculated using the same approach described for Table 5. The maximum possible score for each barrier was 20.

An optional, open-ended question also sought insights from Group 2 respondents on other barriers to full participation in the incentive. One respondent specified 'work commitments' as a major barrier. Another wrote, "As a mature student, I didn't feel like I needed to justify" how they had addressed teacher feedback through a written explanation.

Group 2: Motivators for Future Feedback Action

Table 9 ranks the relative influence of different motivators for implementing teacher feedback in the future among Group 2 respondents. More constructive feedback was the most frequently selected motivator. Unlike Group 1 respondents, no Group 2 respondent selected receiving feedback earlier or a bonus mark greater than 3%.

Table 9

Relative Influence of Motivators for Future Implementation of Teacher Feedback Among Group 2 Respondents

Motivators		Survey Results	
Ranking	**Motivator**	**n**	**%**
1	More constructive feedback	2	50
2	A later assignment due date	1	25
2	More comprehensive feedback	1	25
4	Less comprehensive feedback	0	0
4	Receiving assignment feedback earlier	0	0
4	A bonus mark greater than 3%	0	0

Notes. Rankings reflect the number of Group 2 respondents selecting each factor when asked which conditions would increase their likelihood of implementing feedback in future assignments. Percentages are based on Group 2 respondents (n = 4).

Group 3: Barriers to Participation

Only one respondent did not participate in the incentive. The survey sought to identify the relative influence of different barriers to their non-participation in the incentive. The respondent indicated that the time pressure and effort required to prepare a written response had a 'strong influence'. Meanwhile, the effort needed to review the feedback and feedback timeliness were noted as having 'some influence'.

Other Comments

In the final optional question, respondents were invited to comment on the Bonus Mark Incentive and the nature of the assignment feedback they had received. Twelve of the 23 survey respondents (52%) provided written comments (n = 12). Positive remarks on the incentive are evident, with seven responses (58%) expressing such sentiment. One respondent provided the following anecdotal reflection:

> I really appreciated [the Bonus Mark] Incentive. As a mature-aged … student, the memories of my high school grades not reflecting all the effort I put into my studies [have] engrained a deep fear (still 20 years on) of failing at university. The … incentive gave me reassurance that if my assessment wasn't quite up to scratch, but I showed that I had put the effort into improving, I could still increase my marks.

Another respondent noted that the incentive had "made me really stop and think about the feedback given and how I could improve rather than just skimming feedback, not really taking it in." Another wrote, "I appreciate the intention of the bonus 3% mark and found it had driven me to improve my academic writing and act on past feedback." Similarly, another respondent "thought it was a great initiative and made me pay more attention to the feedback." A Group 2 respondent also provided the following comment on the impact of the incentive despite their partial participation, "Although I didn't prepare a response for the bonus mark, simply having that option encouraged me to consider and implement my previous feedback more thoughtfully."

Positive comments on the feedback itself were also common, with half of the written responses expressing such sentiment. One respondent wrote, “The feedback I received was very helpful. I had returned to study after a very long time and was eager to receive any tips on how I could improve along the way.” Another stated, “The feedback I received was always clear, concise and relevant,” while another wrote, “The feedback was great to know what I needed to work on and what I was doing well.” Two students commended the feedback’s usefulness, one describing it as “always good and useful” and the other as “very helpful.”

Discussion

The study examined how a small-scale assessment-design intervention shaped students’ engagement with feedback and the factors that supported or constrained their feedback action. In summary, the incentive was associated with high levels of participation and cumulative improvement in essay quality among participants, while marks emerged as the principal motivator and time pressure as the principal barrier to feedback action.

RQ1: Impacts of the Bonus Mark Incentive[2]

The Bonus Mark Incentive operated as a strong extrinsic motivator, consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that students often adopt instrumental approaches when rewards are salient (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This was reflected in the high participation rates: of the 23 survey respondents, 22 (96%) engaged in the incentive at least partially, and 16 (70%) fully participated in both rounds. These patterns align with research showing that students prioritise feedback when it is clearly linked to assessment outcomes and opportunities to improve marks (Evans, 2013; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Price et al., 2011). Similarly, Feedback Intervention Theory suggests that feedback influences performance by directing students’ attention. In this study, the Bonus Mark Incentive appears to have directed students’ attention toward the feedback they had received, prompting them to revisit comments and consider how these could improve their next submission. By offering a clear performance goal in the form of bonus marks, the incentive likely strengthened students’ motivation to act on feedback, contributing to the high rates of uptake observed among participants (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Feedback-viewing rates declined from 84.62% for the first essay to 53.85% for the third, illustrating how students disengage from feedback when no further opportunity to apply it remains. This pattern is consistent with longstanding evidence that students engage most with feedback when assessment structures create clear opportunities for uptake (Black & Wiliam, 1998). As Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue, feedback is most effective when it provides direction for future improvement—an affordance not available for the final essay. These findings reinforce the importance of assessment design in enabling feedback use (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015; To, 2022).

Students who participated consistently demonstrated cumulative improvements across the trimester, suggesting a scaffolding effect that strengthened their academic writing over time. These patterns align with models of self-regulated learning that emphasise iterative cycles of feedback, action and refinement (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020; Nicol & Macfarlane-

[2] Unless otherwise stated, percentages in this subsection relate to students eligible for the Bonus Mark Incentive (N = 39).

Dick, 2006). They also resonate with Archer's (2010) argument that effective feedback processes help students internalise standards over time.

In contrast, non-participants did not exhibit similar gains, likely due to limited engagement with feedback. However, the small cohort size, use of a single assessor and non-anonymous marking introduce interpretive limitations, including potential familiarity effects. These comparisons should therefore be interpreted with caution.

RQ2: Motivators and Barriers to Feedback Action[3]

Marks were the most prominent motivator, with the desire to achieve a higher mark receiving the highest influence score (96%) among Group 1 respondents. This emphasis on marks was reinforced by similarly high ratings for the Bonus Mark Incentive itself (94%) and the desire to achieve an exceptional unit mark (91%), suggesting that students viewed the incentive as both a practical and strategic opportunity to enhance their performance. Intrinsic motivations were also evident, with the desire to improve academic writing skills receiving an influence score of 90%. This interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation aligns with research showing that students' engagement with feedback is shaped by both instrumental and developmental orientations (Evans, 2013; Sutton, 2012). The respondents' strong valuation of constructive feedback is consistent with Sadler's (1989, 2010) argument that learners require access to standards and quality criteria to make evaluative judgements and meaningfully apply feedback.

Affective and relational factors also shaped engagement. Some students participated fully to acknowledge the teacher's effort or to reassure themselves that improvement was possible. These findings align with research highlighting the emotional dimensions of feedback and the ways in which affect can support or inhibit engagement (Dawson et al., 2021; Winstone et al., 2017). Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) Feedback Intervention Theory similarly emphasises that feedback can trigger self-related emotions that influence engagement.

Time pressure emerged as the most significant barrier, particularly for students balancing full-time employment with part-time study. This was reflected in the decline in participation for the third essay (41.03%, compared with 64.10% for the second), which coincided with multiple concurrent assessment deadlines. These findings align with research showing that structural constraints—rather than motivation alone—shape students' capacity to engage with feedback (de Kleijn, 2023; Price et al., 2011). Feedback timeliness also influenced engagement, reinforcing the importance of providing feedback early enough to be actionable (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015).

Practical Implications

The incentive's effectiveness depends on the presence of well-sequenced assessment tasks that enable students to apply feedback. In units where assessments are discrete or 'one-off'—a pattern reinforced by structural and disciplinary norms across many institutions—opportunities for feedback uptake are limited (Norton et al., 2013). This structural constraint was evident in the decline in feedback-viewing for the third essay. While teachers can design linked tasks within a

[3] Unless otherwise stated, percentages in this subsection relate to survey respondents (n = 23) or to Group 1, Group 2 or Group 3 respondents (n = 18, 4 or 1), as indicated.

unit, alignment across units requires broader curriculum-level coordination (Carless, 2015; Carless et al., 2011).

The combination of bonus marks, improved work quality, and multiple opportunities to participate can lead to substantially higher marks. While this aligns with the design dimension of teacher feedback literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2023), it raises considerations for the pragmatic dimension, which concerns how feedback practices operate within institutional constraints. If higher marks are viewed unfavourably by administrators or conflict with expectations regarding mark distributions, the incentive may be perceived as problematic despite its pedagogical value. Greater flexibility in institutional policy may therefore be needed to ensure that improved student performance is recognised without administrative barriers.

Several further insights emerge from these findings regarding factors that may support student engagement with feedback in similar contexts. First, marks can function as an effective extrinsic motivator for engaging with feedback. At the same time, students' desire to learn from feedback reflects intrinsic motivation shaped by life stage and prior experiences, a dimension that assessment design alone may not substantially influence. Mark-based incentives may therefore be most effective when they complement students' existing motivations to learn.

The nature and delivery of feedback also matter. Students' emotional responses to feedback can shape their willingness to act on it, so supporting students in managing negative emotions may facilitate feedback uptake (Dawson et al., 2021). Feedback that highlights both strengths and areas for improvement may elicit more positive emotional responses and encourage action, and positive teacher–student rapport may further enhance students' engagement with feedback. Providing feedback promptly is equally important, as it enables students to implement it in subsequent assessments.

Finally, time pressure remains a key constraint. Time constraints can hinder participation in mark-based incentives, particularly for students balancing study with work and, for many, family commitments, and minimising the effort required to participate may help mitigate this barrier. Taken together, these insights suggest that mark-based incentives are most likely to support feedback action when they are paired with timely, constructive feedback and designed with students' competing commitments in mind.

Theoretical Implications

Carless and Boud (2018, p. 1319) conceptualise student feedback literacy as comprising four inter-related features—"appreciating feedback," "making judgments," "managing affect" and "taking action". The findings suggest that the Bonus Mark Incentive can support the development of student feedback literacy across all four features. The incentive helped respondents *appreciate feedback* by prompting them to revisit comments from a previous essay and recognise their relevance for subsequent work. It encouraged respondents to *make judgements*, as they considered how feedback could be used to improve quality and reframed it as an opportunity for enhancing their next essay. The written reflection component appeared to help respondents *manage affect* more productively, offering reassurance that effortful feedback engagement could contribute to improved outcomes. The requirement to implement feedback and provide a brief written explanation fostered *taking action*, encouraging respondents to both apply feedback and articulate how they had done so. This aligns with broader calls for feedback processes that

foreground student agency and engagement rather than transmission (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Molloy et al., 2020; Winstone & Carless, 2019). These patterns indicate that well-designed incentives can create conditions that support students' engagement with feedback and foster the development of feedback literacy.

Limitations and Future Research

The survey's response rate of 59% (n = 23) may not accurately reflect the perspectives of all the students who had the opportunity to participate in the Bonus Mark Incentive. Nevertheless, the study's survey response rate exceeds the average online survey response rate of 44.1% reported for education research, although it is below the 72.7% average for surveys sent to fewer than 100 participants (Wu et al., 2022).

The relatively small eligible sample (N = 39) makes the study susceptible to sampling error, and self-selection and non-response may limit the applicability of its findings to other contexts. The small number of partial and non-participants among survey respondents, particularly the minimal representation of non-participants (one respondent), limits the extent to which the study can illuminate barriers to feedback action and reasons for non-engagement. The absence of demographic data further constrains interpretation. Insights relating to relational or affective dynamics are drawn from a small number of open-ended responses and should therefore be regarded as indicative rather than definitive. Future research involving larger and more diverse cohorts is needed to clarify the conditions that influence engagement with feedback-related incentives. Recent work on feedback literacy interventions (e.g., Di Zhang et al., 2024) suggests that larger-scale studies may reveal more nuanced patterns of engagement.

This pilot study forms part of the author's ongoing research on student feedback literacy. Since 2023, a different assessment-design intervention involving an embedded assessment component has been introduced in the same unit. Its effectiveness in promoting student feedback action is being evaluated and will be compared with the Bonus Mark Incentive. Future research could explore alternative assessment-design approaches that leverage marks to promote feedback uptake, including incentives involving a higher bonus mark. Such investigations may further clarify the conditions under which students engage with feedback and how assessment environments can be structured to support this engagement in similar settings.

Conclusion

Feedback is a crucial learning tool for university students, yet feedback processes often involve challenges that limit their effectiveness. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on how student feedback literacy may be supported by evaluating a Bonus Mark Incentive, which offered up to 3% for incorporating feedback from a previous essay, in a first-year urban and regional planning unit at the University of New England, Australia. The unit is taken predominantly by mature-age, time-constrained students studying online, for whom timely, actionable feedback is particularly important.

This study was guided by two research questions. The first examined the impact of the Bonus Mark Incentive on student feedback action. The findings indicate that the incentive functioned as a strong extrinsic motivator within this cohort, contributing to improvements in the quality of work across the trimester. Because the incentive was implemented across multiple assessments, it

also appeared to support a scaffolding effect in student learning, enabling iterative cycles of feedback uptake and refinement.

The second research question explored the key motivators and barriers associated with student feedback action. Marks and the desire to learn emerged as prominent motivators, alongside affective and interpersonal influences. Time pressure was identified as the principal barrier to feedback action. These patterns must be understood in the context of this cohort's competing work and study commitments, often compounded by family responsibilities, which make the timeliness and usability of feedback particularly consequential for engagement. More broadly, the study suggests that modest, well-sequenced changes to assessment design can create conditions in which students act on feedback, thereby supporting the development of their feedback literacy.

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