

# Improving student uptake and understanding of feedback through a dialogue model of assessment

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## Executive Summary

Through the use of questionnaires, focus groups and a pilot study, this research examines student perception of assessment feedback and whether a dialogue model of assessment can aid in improving this perception. The findings of the study are that the dialogue model did improve student perception. It also identified the following recommendations for consideration:

**Recommendation 1:** While a QE approach could be taken where a minimum standard of feedback is determined at University level, the researchers feel this might be restrictive and is better left to subject groups to determine. This minimum level can then be used as a QA check by internal moderators and at Quality Review events. It will be important to ensure that if feedback falls below this subject-determined minimum level that action is taken within the group to bring feedback up to the standard required.

**Recommendation 2:** It should be written into the feedback policy that students have a right to a meeting to discuss feedback. This needs to be clearly expressed to ensure students recognize that this is not an opportunity to negotiate grades (as the researchers have personally experienced) and given in the spirit of helping the student develop. The researchers believe that as educators we should see the value in such meetings and make time for them. If good, constructive, clear feedback is given at the time of the assessment then there will be very few students who need to take up this opportunity.

**Recommendation 3:** Within programme documentation when generic transferable skills are discussed there should be a requirement to show where the team are developing student understanding of the assessment process.

**Recommendation 4:** Staff should be encouraged to include their marking scheme with the assessment brief.

**Recommendation 5:** Monitor the result of the new assessment strategy in terms of student attainment and perception about the fairness of assessment. In particular identify how many modules have gone to single units of assessment and where this happens how students are supported with feedforward.

**Recommendation 6:** Identify if there is a University standard expectation for particular types of assessment instrument at each level. This would help us to communicate lecturer expectations to students.

## Background

Assessment is the means by which we measure academic standards. Assessment, and its QA, takes up a considerable proportion of staff time, colours reputation, impacts on league tables and, most importantly, shapes the way students study and learn. When the NSS shows students are unhappy with what we do it is important. We also know that poor early experience of assessment leads to student failure and non-completion. Often the gut reaction is to produce more feedback rather than look at the whole assessment process but there is evidence that greater written feedback leads to more work for staff with limited influence on student achievement. This project is split into 2 phases. Phase 1 will concentrate student perception on assessment feedback, while phase 2 will examine if this perception changes when a more dialogue-based approach to assessment is adopted.

## Methodology

Three semester 2 modules have been selected from stage 3. These modules contain mixed groups of students from Computing, Business, Policing and Sport. One module was used as a control with the other two using the dialogue method of assessment. The dialogic model of feedback/assessment has at its heart the aim to increase student engagement with assessment feedback and to create an assessment regime which supports reflection and feedforward to improve understanding and therefore results. The selected modules for the dialogic model were very different in style and assessment type. This was deliberate to allow for different implementations of the model to take place.

## Use of questionnaires

At the start and the end of the modules students were surveyed about their understanding and experience of feedback. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions with options of 'never', 'almost never', 'sometimes', 'almost always', 'always' and 'don't know' as possible responses. The questions fell into the categories of 'student perception', 'support for feedback', 'usefulness', 'personalisation' and 'student use of feedback'. The wording used on the first 5 questions was the same as that used on the National Student Survey. Other questions were gathered by examining other published research output on assessment feedback and on the basis of the over 30 years teaching experience of the researchers.

## Use of focus groups

A subset of students agreed to examine the topic in more depth through focus groups at the beginning and end of the modules. The focus group participants were taken from the modules where the dialogue model of assessment was being used. Two trained students, from courses outside those participating, led the focus group discussions<sup>1</sup>. In addition to taking notes, recordings of the focus groups were used, but not given to the project researchers until after the modules were completed to ensure no possible question of bias in assessment. Questions for the pre and post module focus groups were determined based on gaining depth of understanding of student feeling and experience, to clarify matters which arose through the questionnaires and to examine student feeling towards current University plans with regard to assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> It was felt necessary to use independent facilitators as the project researchers were also the assessors in two of the modules and there was concern that students might not accurately reflect their views if they felt it might impact on their grades.

The four main questions asked at the pre-module focus groups were

- *What is assessment feedback?*
- *What makes feedback good and why?*
- *What are your experiences of bad feedback and why do you consider them bad?*
- *How does feedback help you learn?*

In addition to these main questions there were more minor questions where students were asked their views on the use of feedback forms and technology for feedback.

In the post-module focus groups the questions were:

- *Tell me about your experiences of assessment feedback in this module?*
- *If you could give staff advice on what you would most like to see from feedback, what would it be?*
- *If there was to be a minimum standard for assessment feedback, what would you expect that to contain?*
- *The university is moving to an assessment strategy which means there will be either 1 or 2 units of assessment in a single module. Do you have any views on this?*
- *Do you think you think you have a good understanding of assessment requirements?*
- *Are there any types of assessment which you find particularly difficult?*

With the exception of the first question, which was designed to find out about their experience of the dialogue method of assessment feedback, students were asked to discuss their assessment experience across all of their studies, past and present.

## **Phase 1: results**

### **Focus group analysis**

In total 21 students took part in focus groups. These students were a subset of the students who undertook the questionnaire. The questions were deliberately broad to encourage discussion and elicit deeper answers on student experience and perception of assessment feedback.

*Question 1: What is assessment feedback?* This question was asked as an ice-breaker and to help determine what students thought feedback was. To some extent, this would help us to determine whether the students had realistic expectations and whether staff and student perception was shared. In the main students recognized that it could come in different forms and that it should highlight good work and deficiencies, while providing constructive feedback on how to improve in the future. This is pretty much as the researchers had expected.

*Question 2: What is good feedback and why?* Students across the groups described good feedback as being individualized, detailed and specific to what they were doing. Two examples of good practice were given as one-to-one interview plus comments in one module, and ongoing feedforward on an assessment as students progressed through the module as another. Both of these examples of good practice tie up well with the approach taken in the dialogue model of feedback. However, contrary to what might be expected, students said that feedback need not be lengthy. One example was given of a tutor who

gave the 3 main positive and 3 main areas for improvement on a piece of work. Students found this clear and it helped them to determine where to concentrate efforts in the future.

*Question 3: What is poor feedback and why?* In many ways this was the most important question as NSS results have shown dissatisfaction with assessment feedback and this was an opportunity to find out why. Students commented that much of the feedback they received was generic in nature. They appreciated that providing individualized feedback takes more time to generate but they said they valued this. There was a sense from the discussion that students felt in some way 'cheated' if they only received generic feedback.

Worryingly it was reported that students often just received a grade, ticks or a single sentence as feedback and this was considered unhelpful and of little use. The sector has provided much training and guidance on what makes good feedback, but it is clear that this is not always practiced.

**Recommendation 1:** While a QE approach could be taken where a minimum standard of feedback is determined at University level, the researchers feel this might be restrictive and is better left to subject groups to determine. This minimum level can then be used as a QA check by internal moderators and at Quality Review events. It will be important to ensure that if feedback falls below this subject-determined minimum level that action is taken within the group to bring feedback up to the standard required.

Students also recognized that where they had received a poor grade they might need more feedback than the minimum. There was a report that module tutors offer to have meetings to discuss feedback in more depth, but when students email to arrange these their emails go unanswered or excuses of workload are given to discourage these.

**Recommendation 2:** It should be written into the feedback policy that students have a right to a meeting to discuss feedback. This needs to be clearly expressed to ensure students recognize that this is not an opportunity to negotiate grades (as the researchers have personally experienced) and given in the spirit of helping the student develop. The researchers believe that as educators we should see the value in such meetings and make time for them. If good, constructive, clear feedback is given at the time of the assessment then there will be very few students who need to take up this opportunity.

Staff often report that they provide feedback but students don't pick this up. This can be very frustrating and may lead to lower levels of quality feedback. Students stated that there was little incentive to pick up feedback as this was seen as optional. Again the issue of generic feedback was brought up under question 4, with students stating that it is pretty much ignored as not relevant to them and their assessment. The researchers believe that these points may show a lack of understanding of the value of feedback and how to use it effectively. In addition to all the work which has gone on to improve the feedback provided, this may show a need for greater concentration on assessment literacy.

**Recommendation 3:** Within programme documentation when generic transferable skills are discussed there should be a requirement to show where the team are developing student understanding of the assessment process.

Finally, students commented on the lack of feedback on exams. They understood why this was the case, but in commenting clearly recognized that it might be useful. The researchers have been made aware of a scheme operating at another institution where students are given stickers which they place on their exam scripts if they would like feedback<sup>2</sup>. It will be made clear to students that by using the 'feedback sticker' they are making a conscious choice to come in to discuss their exam paper. This does not increase the amount of time taken to mark the exam as the feedback provided would be in discussion with the student in real time rather than through lengthy written comments. The modules selected for the research within this project are relatively small in terms of student number and it could be argued that by using the dialogue model within the rest of the assessment this might create a greater appetite for such a sticker system.

*Question 4: How does feedback help you learn?* In one focus group there was a discussion on feedback being designed to help student confidence rather than for learning. With poor NSS scores on feedback, it is interesting to consider whether this results, in part, from a lack of satisfaction if students receive negative feedback as this goes against their idea of boosting confidence. It is planned that this will be discussed in greater lengths in the follow up focus groups at the end of the semester to see if this really is an issue. If this is a substantial problem, recommendation 3 would help to reduce this issue.

There was also discussion of questioning how marking takes place and students showed a lack of awareness of the assessment criteria leaving students to work out for themselves what is required by the marker.

**Recommendation 4:** Staff should be encouraged to include their marking scheme with the assessment brief.

There was a sense that different markers had different requirements from assessment. As a small test feedback from a psychology essay was compared to the type of feedback which would be given in a business or computing essay of the same stage. It was found that contrary to student belief the same requirements were being sought.

*Question 5: How useful do you think feedback forms are?* One of the key reasons for asking this question was because at least I School now has a policy of using these. Many students had not seen feedback forms before and were shown the currently approved forms for DBS. The view was that these were possibly acceptable when the marker is time-constrained but should be used in conjunctions with individualized feedback. It was felt that a tick-box approach was not as useful as written feedback.

*Question 6: How can technology be used to improve feedback?* A key reason for asking this question was due to discussion at University level on the use of technology for feedback. Students identified several ways in which technology could be used, but the overwhelming feeling was that it only provided convenience and that students were equally happy to receive feedback in other forms. The main point was that they wanted the feedback, on whatever platform.

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<sup>2</sup> This was tried in phase 2 and is discussed later.

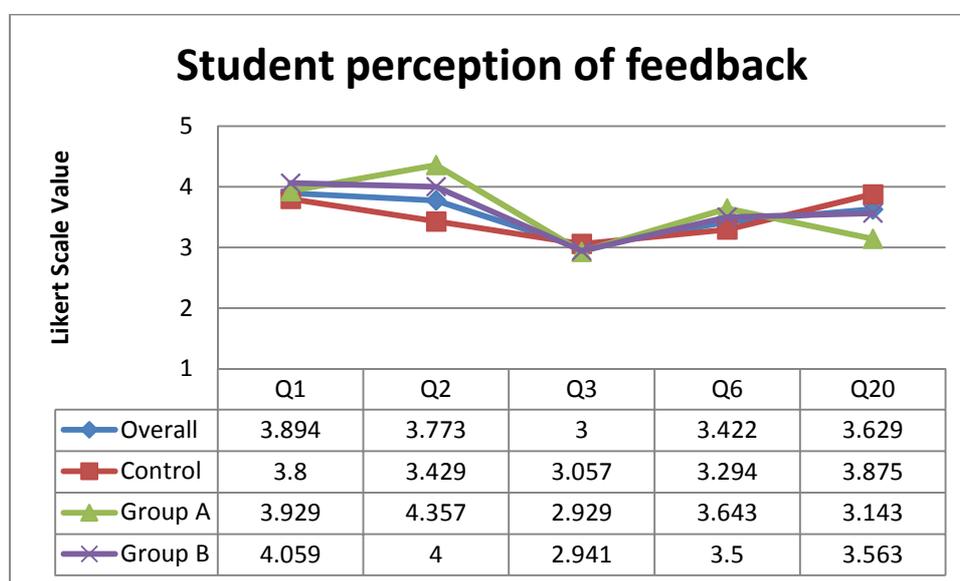
## Questionnaire results

Sixty-six students participated in the questionnaire. Full questions and results can be found in appendices 1 and 2. The Likert scale used was:

Description	Numeric value
Never	1
Almost never	2
Sometimes	3
Almost always	4
Always	5

### Student perception of the assessment and feedback process

Questions in this section examined student views on aspects which could be regarded as fairness. The two areas of most concern are Q3 (feedback has been prompt) and Q20 (if I don't understand I am comfortable asking). Results on speed should be improved given the new assessment policy.

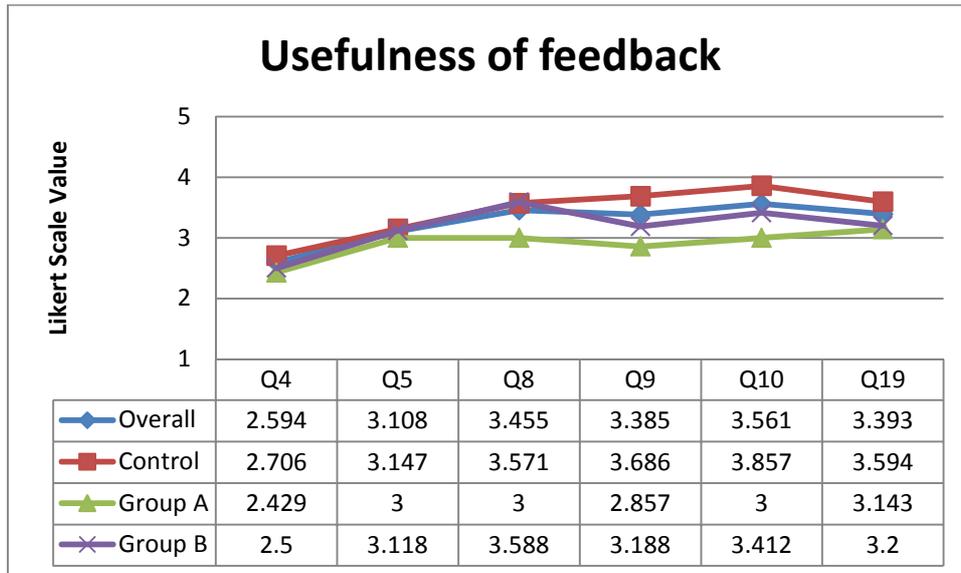


The results on approachability of staff are of greater concern, especially when the data is looked at in closer detail. As can be seen below 36% of students are unhappy approaching staff for greater feedback. Although the questionnaires are not tagged to show which subject area the students belong to, focus group discussions suggest that this is a problem in one particular subject group.

Group A	never	almost never	sometimes	almost always	always
Q20. If I don't understand feedback I am comfortable asking for more information	7%	29%	21%	29%	14%

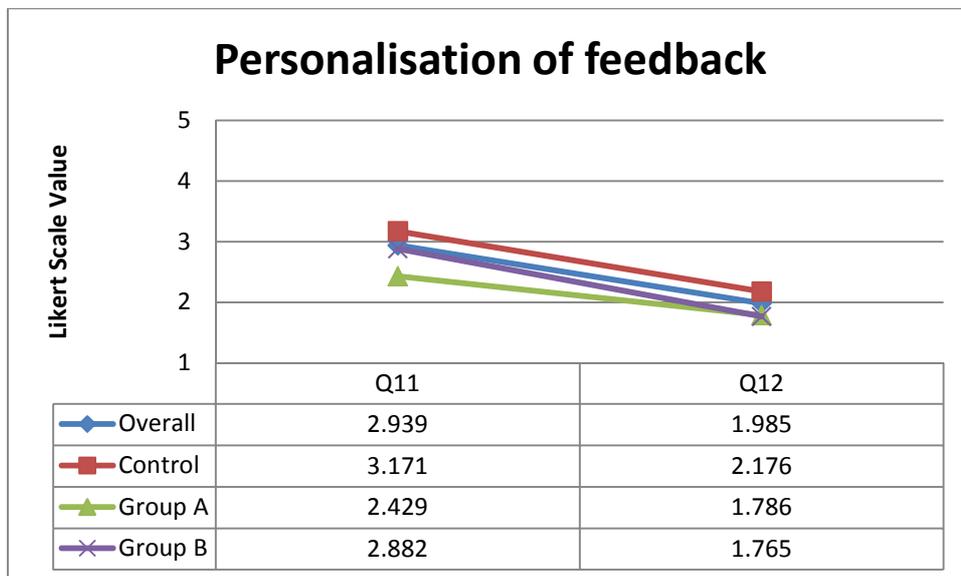
### Usefulness

The questions on the usefulness of feedback, in terms of detail, clarity, use for future assessments within and out-with the module give positive scores. Group A shows lower scores in this area, but the focus group involving this group showed a split between the subject groups concerned and this may be a demonstration of a problem with one particular programme. Question 4 (I have received detailed comment on my work) is the most concerning question as this is also a question used on the NSS. This was one of the lowest scored questions in this survey and shows all groups stating that the detail of feedback provided falls below what they believe to be useful. (See recommendations 1 and 2)



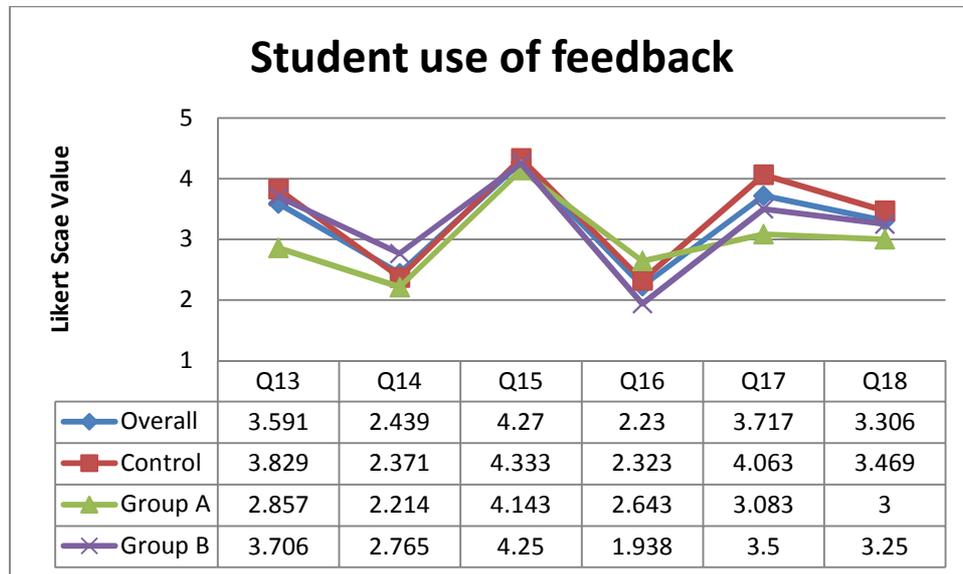
### *Personalisation*

There has been a move over recent years towards more use of generic feedback. This is especially true in large modules where this is a speedy way to return feedback to the class. Question 11 shows that this has become common. Both in the focus groups and through question 12 students are clear that this is not what they would prefer.



### Student use of feedback

This section was unlike the others in that it asked how students used their feedback. This section sought to identify whether students had a sufficient knowledge of how to get the most from their feedback.



Although the overall for Q13 (collecting feedback) is reasonably good, we can see that again group A is considerably lower than the other groups. Again if we look at this group in more detail we can see that the split in the group is quite marked and the overall score for the group masks a deeper problem with 36% of students never or almost never collecting their feedback. On the whole the biggest issue is that there were no students in this group who always collected their feedback.

Group A	never	almost never	sometimes	almost always	always
13. I always collect feedback	7	29	36	29	0

Question 14 asked students if they were more interested in the grade than the feedback. It is good to see that this question scored poorly.

Question 15 asked students if they were more likely to pay attention to feedback if their grade is lower than expected. Although this is welcome, in many ways it would be better to see students paying attention to their feedback regardless of their expectations as this is how they can improve in future. Unless a student gains an A20 there is always room for improvement.

Question 16 asked if students returned to their feedback after first receiving it. Sadly this does not seem to be the case. This is contradicted by results for question 18 which asked if they return to the feedback if they are creating a similar piece of work. This strange finding may in fact be caused by a flaw recognized in the questionnaire after it had been used. Unlike all but 1 other question on the survey (Q14) this question was phrased in a negative manner. This may well have skewed results for these questions. The results for these questions have been reversed in their presentation in the graphs and data presented to ensure that they read in the same way.

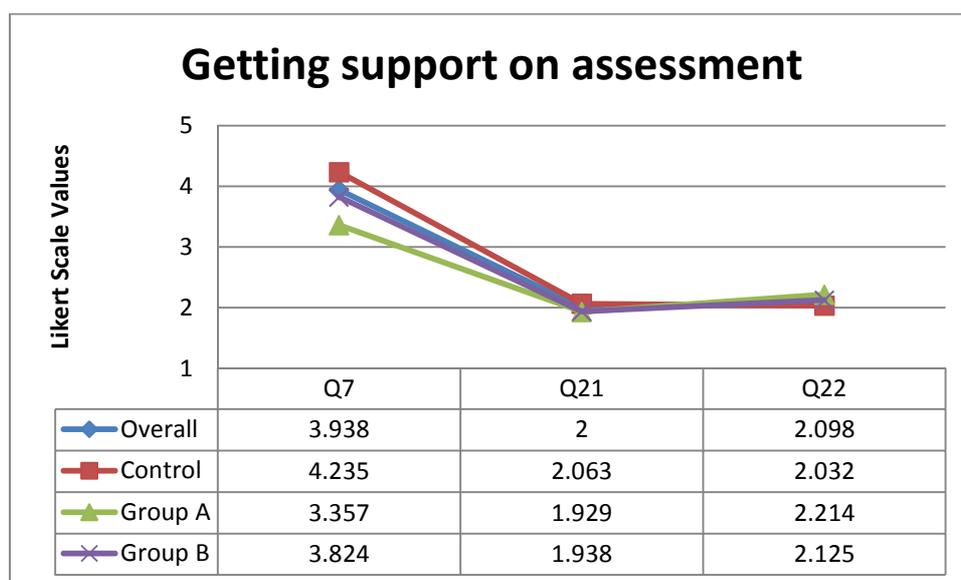
Question 17 asks if students discussed their feedback with fellow students and for the most part good practice seems to exist. However group A again shows a lower score and detailed examination of this group shows a similar split in terms of percentages of student respondents with 33% not taking advantage of peer discussion.

Group A	never	almost never	sometimes	almost always	always
Q17. Discuss with other students	8	25	33	17	17

This section shows us how students use feedback. Although some students have good study practice this is not unanimous. As all groups were stage 3 students it could be expected that students would have developed better study practice by now. (See recommendation 3 above)

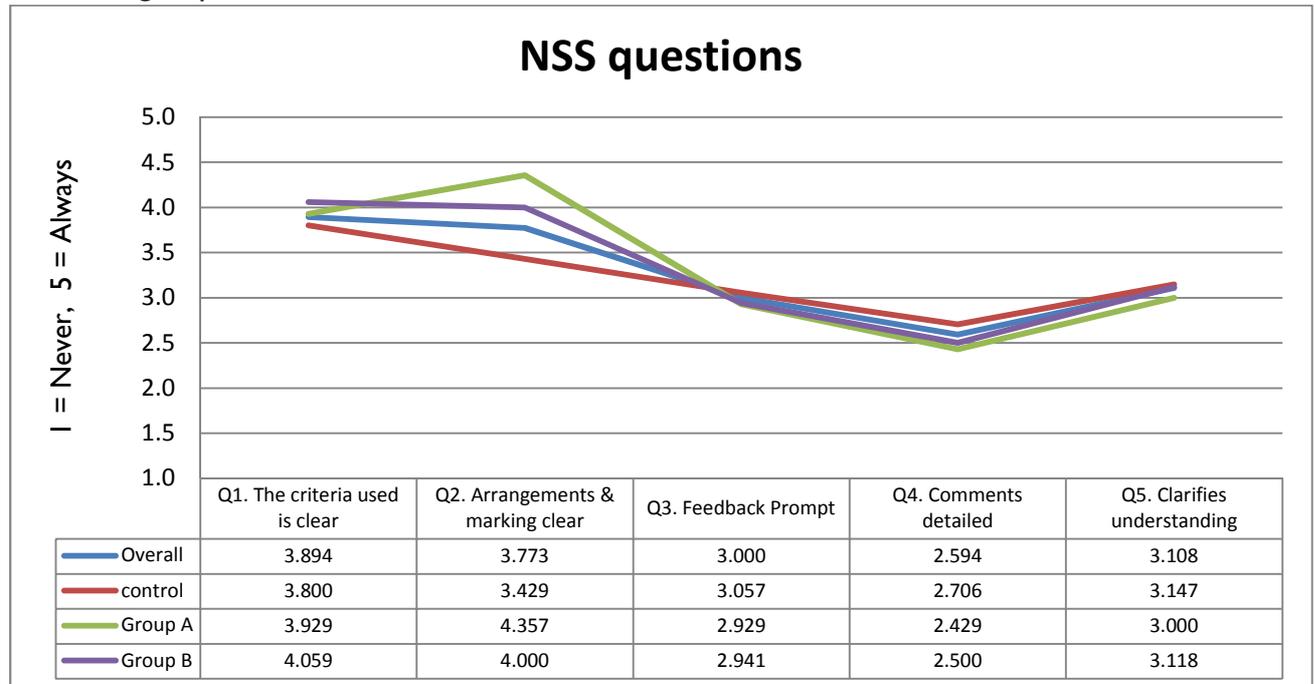
### *Seeking support for assessment*

This final section asked about how students were supported in assessment. Question 7 asked about staff willingness to discuss assessment requirements and for the most part this appears to be almost always the case. Questions 21 and 22 asked about support out with the module (Q21 other academic staff, Q22 other non-academic staff). While these score lowly this is not necessarily cause for concern. This may indicate that either students are generally happy with the support provided within the module or it may indicate that they are unaware of other services provided by the University e.g. Student Services.



### NSS questions

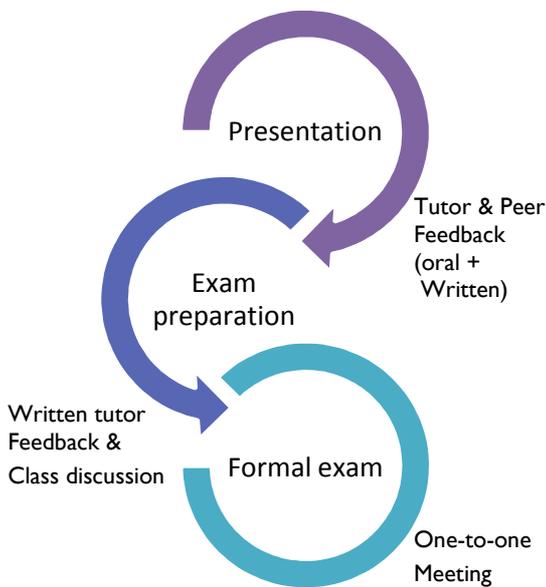
Questions 1 to 5 were taken from the NSS. These showed a close correlation of results between student groups. Questions 1 and 2 elicited positive results with questions 3-5 less positive results. Question 4 in particular showed dissatisfaction with the detail of comments on work. This confirms some of the focus group feedback on poor experiences students have had with the quality of their feedback. This is interesting as the greatest focus within the University has been on speed of feedback, yet this was not indicated as a problem during the focus groups either.



## Phase 2: Changing student perception through a dialogue based model of assessment.

The two modules selected for assessment adjustment were MT0927a Operations Management and CE0935a Designing Rich Internet Applications.

### Group A: MT0927a Managing Operations



In 2012-13 MT0927a was 100% exam assessed. Students performed well enough using this method of assessment, but showed concern in advance of the assessment due to the 'one-shot' approach. It was therefore decided to include a coursework element which would also deepen understanding of some of the topics. In selecting this module for this research project the deliverer re-examined the suitability of this as an assessment method given that a dialogue based approach needed to be adopted. This was therefore changed to be a 20% group presentation and 20% mock exam question.

The use of the group presentation was to encourage the development of peer study groups within the class and students were allocated to mixed programme groups and assigned a topic for investigation. The plan was that once the presentations had taken place students were given immediate oral feedback from the tutor and peers, followed by written feedback from the tutor. This would

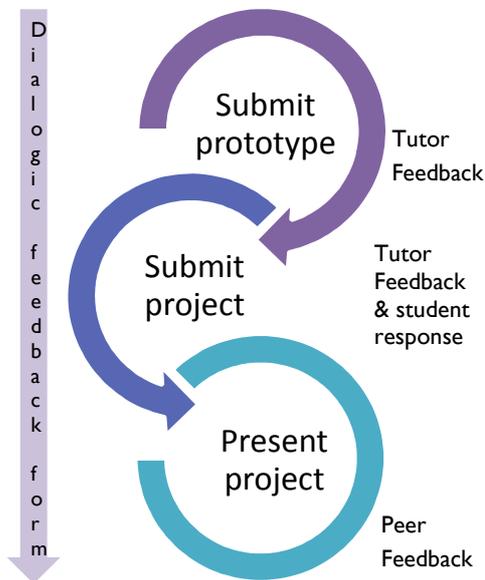
provide information on the group's ability to research the topic and advice on how to improve this.

Two weeks after this presentation, students undertake a 'mock' exam question, under exam conditions, on the same topic as the presentation. Students were given individualised feedback on their performance in answering the exam questions and on how well they have taken on board the feedback on their research. This meant that when they approached the exam component they had been given feedforward on how to approach researching topics and answering that style of exam question.

One known failing of exams as assessments is that students rarely get feedback on their performance, other than the grade. Students were given a sticker that they placed on their exam paper if they wished to attend a one-to-one exam feedback session two weeks after the exam has been sat. By using the sticker students were making a conscious choice to receive feedback and to attend a meeting arranged by the tutor. The 'sticker' approach might reassure staff that they are not pointlessly spending time preparing feedback which will not be collected (see results to question 13 in the questionnaire below).

## Group B: CE0935a Developing RIAs

This module is predominantly practical in orientation, with a project related coursework (50%) and a computer-based exam (50%), consisting of development tasks and questions inviting theoretical reflection. In this module a dialogic feedback form was used to prompt students to reflect on their own work and what they would like feedback on and to discuss how they acted on that feedback.



The assessment has multiple parts as follows:

- *Submit a prototype* for their project coursework together with a dialogic feedback form which contained a section for students to request personalised feedback.
- *Submit the project* together with the dialogic feedback form which will contained a section for students to state how they had responded to feedback.
- *Present* their project to the tutor and peers.
- *Peer critique* the work of each other and complete the dialogic feedback form.

## Phase 2: results

At the end of the modules students were again surveyed and focus groups used to determine if there is any difference with their experience of the dialogue model. Focus groups were again conducted by trained student facilitators.

Additionally staff experience of using the model was gathered to determine the operational requirements and perception of the efficiency and effectiveness of the method.

## Focus group analysis

In total 20 students took part in focus groups. These were mostly the same students who had participated in the original feedback groups and were a subset of the students who had completed the pre and post module questionnaire.

*Question 1: Tell me about your experiences of assessment feedback in this module?* The focus group facilitators were not participants in the delivery of the two modules where the dialogue model was being used and did not have any knowledge of the assessment feedback approach being used. It was particularly important here as the researchers wanted to get student perception of the model without any possibility of facilitator bias prompting answers. Group A described the experience as providing speedy, personalised, regular (every 2-3 weeks) feedback which contained specific details of how to improve. Group B were more detailed in their response, stating that they got ongoing feedback on their prototype providing ample time and feedback in advance of the final assessment. They

mentioned the positive attitude and helpfulness of the peer review element. They also identified the two-way channel of feedback, created by the ability to submit questions to the module leader for specific comment. As with the previous group there was recognition of the ability to use feedback to focus on improvement.

From question 2 onwards students were asked not to concentrate on the pilot module specifically but on their full range of assessment experience.

*Question 2: If you could give staff advice on what you would most like to see from feedback, what would it be?* Group A students reiterated many of the points identified in the earlier focus group and questionnaire: make it personal, structured, actually give it out, legible (preferably electronically produced) and be available for meetings (and not just say you will be). On the last point the group was split with one programme seeing this as a particular problem, but not the other.

Group B found the opportunity to ask questions at the start of a class based on last week's work was good practice. This came as a surprise to the researchers as it is common practice to leave space at the end of classes for questions. However students stated that this didn't always work as they had not had enough time to consider the points made in the class and do their own investigation at this stage and were more likely to come across questions between classes. Therefore taking questions at the start of the next week was more valuable. They also mentioned that they appreciated having dedicated feedback/forward times (either surgeries or within tutorial/lab sessions). This group emphasised the importance of early hand out of coursework specifications and liked the idea of being able to showcase their ideas and gain feedback on them prior to the full work being created.

*Question 3: If there was to be a minimum standard for assessment feedback, what would you expect it to contain?* Both groups specifically asked for 3 types of feedback – what is right, what is wrong and how to improve. In particular they were interested in what was missing from their work. Group A returned to the standardised feedback form shown to them during the pre-module focus group and agreed that a consistent approach to feedback provision, across all schools, would be helpful. One of the two programmes represented in this group was a 'combined studies' group and therefore their modules are shared across 2 different Schools. Group B felt that feedback should also be detailed and reflect the amount of work students had put into the assessment.

Results from questions 2 and 3 continue to support 'recommendation 1' on the need to provide some level of standard for assessment feedback.

*Question 4: The University is moving to an assessment strategy which means there will be either 1 or 2 units of assessment in a single module. Do you have any views on this?* From almost all students there was a resounding dislike for the idea of one unit of assessment. It was felt that a single unit would be problematic if the instrument was not their strength e.g many were worried of not responding well to exam pressure. All students reported a preference

for multiple units of assessments using words like 'fairness' and 'security' when describing their views. Students also felt that feedback would be redundant as they would not be able to use this in future units of assessment. This contradicts earlier findings that students stated they used assessment feedback to help them across and not just within modules. It is also likely to make the implementation of a more dialogue based model of assessment more difficult and given its success in this project this perhaps needs to be considered. This feedback also supports the need for 'recommendation 3' on improving feedback literacy.

With the move to reduced units of assessment and the 10 day turn around it is likely that a greater number of modules will now contain only 1 unit of assessment. This clearly goes against student wishes and may result in more negative feelings towards assessment.

**Recommendation 5:** Monitor the result of the new assessment strategy in terms of student attainment and perception about the fairness of assessment. In particular identify how many modules have gone to single units of assessment and where this happens how students are supported with feedforward.

*Question 5: Do you believe you have a good understanding of assessment requirements? With follow-up questions of: Do you think you need more explanation and guidance on how to approach some assessments or by stage 3 you are pretty comfortable with most assessment types, how many of your assessments come with the marking criteria and how do you use these criteria?* Within both groups student displayed confidence in the assessment instruments themselves, but were less clear about marking criteria. While in some modules they used this as a 'checklist' for their own work, in others the assessment criteria was described as 'too vague' with information from module leaders coming too late on how to prepare for the specific exam, course work etc. Students found statements such as 'use of superior knowledge' difficult to interpret and in some cases the criteria seemed too generalised rather than being specific to the assessment. There was, however, a perception that lecturer expectations varied across modules and the oral guidance given by module leaders was valued more highly over the marking criteria shown. This was also brought up in the phase 1 focus groups.

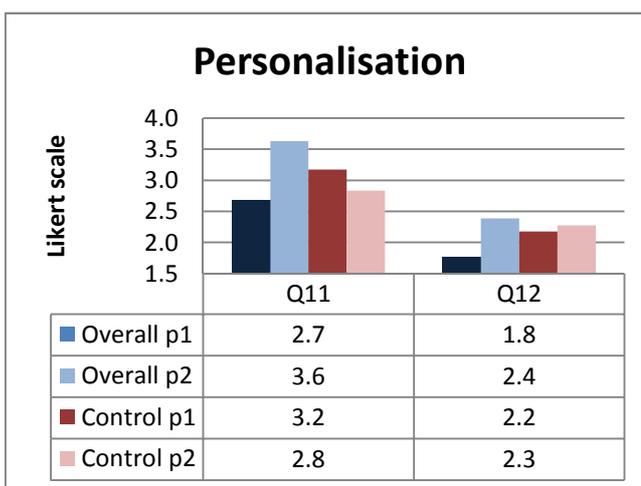
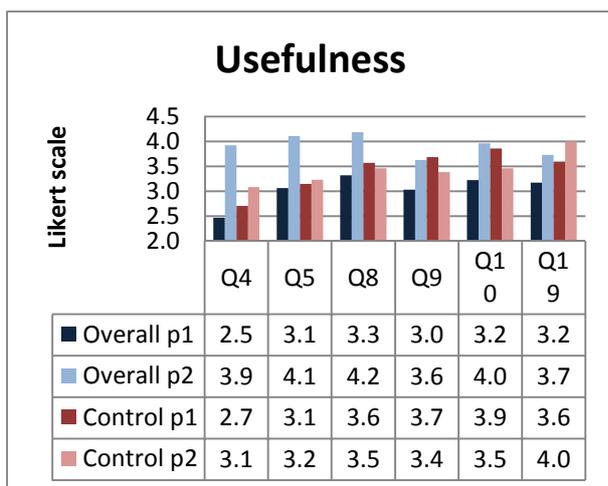
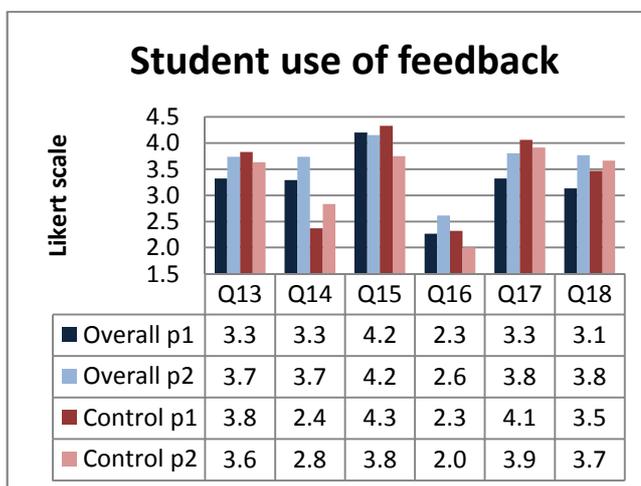
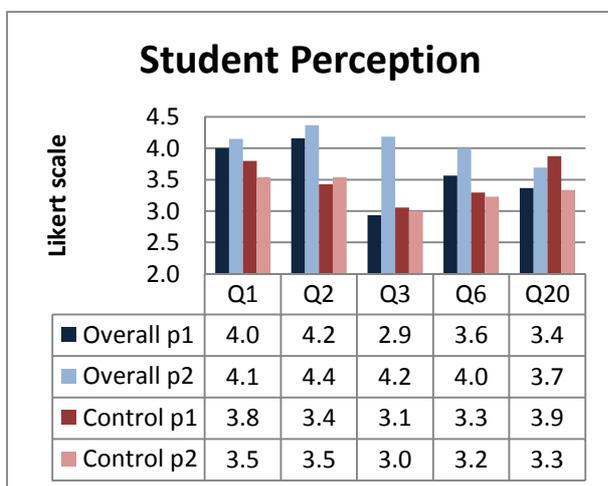
The researchers feel there is a particularly interesting question arising from this: do lecturers want the same thing of the same assessment instrument type? For example, would a Psychology lecturer give an 'A' grade to the same piece of work marked by someone in Business or Computing? The researchers would argue, from experience, that the answer is likely to be 'yes' but in our guidance to students might emphasis different things, while still having the same expectations in terms of analysis, synthesis, research, expression and so on.

**Recommendation 6:** Identify if there is a University standard expectation for particular types of assessment instrument at each level. This would help us to communicate lecturer expectations to students.

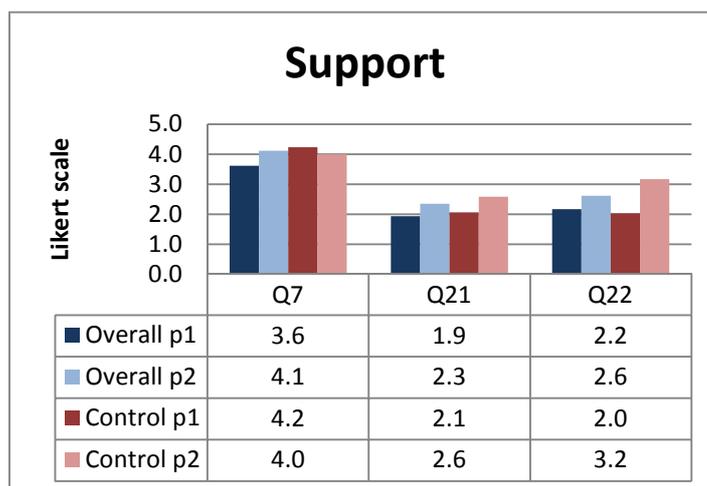
Question 6: Are there any types of assessment which you find particularly difficult? There was a mix of opinions with students stating that exams were more difficult for 'less theory-minded students', self-directed course works for less practice-minded students and case studies without full information being difficult for some. On the whole the feeling was one of all assessment types being difficult in some respect and the difficulty being dependant on the strengths of the individual.

### Questionnaire results

The questionnaire findings at the end of phase 2 show that with the exception of a tiny dip in question 15 (0.05) all scores for the groups undertaking the dialogue model of assessment showed more positive attitudes towards assessment and feedback, with half of the questions showing a 0.5 or better upward movement. <sup>3</sup> As was to be expected, there were very few questions which resulted in more than a 0.5 swing in the control group: 13 reduced their score, 2 reduced by more than 0.5 and 2 increased by 0.5. Overall the control group averaged a -0.01 average change whereas the pilot groups averaged a 0.58 change.



<sup>3</sup> ('P1' = questionnaires submitted at the start of the semester and 'P2' = end of semester. 'Overall' consists of all students in modules where the dialogue model was used. The 'control' group had no change to their approach to teaching learning or assessment).



In particular questions 3, 4 and 5<sup>4</sup> showed over a 1 point positive movement which in a 5 point scale shows a high level of success. These questions are directly taken from the NSS and are closely related to how useful students find feedback. Outside of this project, module feedback using Evasys also showed that students looked upon the modules in a favourably. Therefore the researchers are confident in their assertion that:

The dialogue model of assessment has a positive impact on the perception of students of assessment feedback.

### **Staff perception of the use of the dialogue model of assessment**

Different approaches were taken in the two pilot modules. This was important given the different subject areas, teaching and learning approaches and assessment types. However, both module tutors used the basic principles of the dialogue model for building up student understanding of assessment feedback i.e. Encourage engagement in the feedback/forward process.

#### ***How long did it take to operate the model?***

One concern about the model was the time it would take to engage in such an approach. The tutors estimate that it took 0.5 days extra tutor effort per 10 students (i.e. 1 day extra for MT0927a for 21 students and 1.5 days for CE0935a). Given the increased student satisfaction both tutors agreed that this was a good use of their time.

#### ***Did students benefit from the additional staff effort?***

It is clear that students were considerably happier within the modules where the model was being used (it should be clear that both tutors had operated these modules in the past and changed only the assessment feedback method for this project). However, it is important

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<sup>4</sup> 3. Feedback on my work has been prompt, 4. I have received detailed comments on my work, 5. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand

that students are not only happier in the modules but also that their performance is at least maintained and if not increased.

In MT0927a there were 5 potential rounds of assessment feedback: immediate oral feedback after the presentations, written feedback/forward emailed within the week, written feedback after the individual report, oral feedback/forward to the group post report and pre-exam and a post exam one-to-one meeting. Of the 21 students, 17 students picked up their written feedback to the individual report, either from class or later from collection from the School office. Only 11 students turned up for the feedback/forward session post report and pre-exam. 6 students indicated on their exam paper that they wished to come for one-to-one feedback on the exam, but only 4 attended scheduled meetings. This is interesting in that students self-reports strongly indicated that they are interested in feedback and collecting it. These findings would suggest that in a large number of cases this is not the reality of their behaviour. It also ties in with anecdotal evidence from tutors of students not attending meetings and not picking up feedback.

Results for the module show no difference in the grades achieved by students in this session versus last session (average grade C14). Indeed 2 very specific pieces of advice were given to students re approaching the exam. Only 1 student acted on both pieces of advice with a further 6 acting on only 1 part of the advice. This would indicate that even when advice is given, both orally and in written form, students do not seem to be able to internalise it and act upon it at the correct point. When this was discussed with students who attended the one-to-one meetings they said, on being prompted, that they remembered the advice being given but had 'forgotten' to act upon it. It is clear that students, incorrectly, felt that they needed to focus on content revision and considered this was more important than exam technique. This further supports recommendation 3 on the need to improve student assessment/feedback literacy.

In CE0935a the dialogic feedback model was used to support a project assessment concerned with developing software. The module had approximately 30 students. The model was used as follows:

- Students submitted a prototype for the software together with questions they required in their feedback.
- Students were given personalised feedback
- Students submitted the software together with their response to feedback

As well as credit for the core task students were given credit for preparing questions for feedback and for their written response to feedback.

The grades for the submission of the prototype and project taken across the cohort were virtually the same i.e. the average grade for the prototype phase was 14.55 whilst for the final software it was 14.26. However these averages obscure a more complex picture when examined from the perspective of individual students. Some student grades went up from the prototype some went down. The underlying reason why some student grades went

down is concerned with the fact the second task was far more technically complex than the first. In fact 18 (out of 30) student's grades increased from the first submission to the second. The student's whose grades went up all engaged well with the dialogic feedback model. Furthermore there was a substantial increase in the levels of satisfaction with feedback from before to after the use of the model as reported above.

The grade average for this year's cohort in comparison with last year's was: 14.26 (2013-14) and 12.93 (2012-13) respectively. However, although this appears to be a positive endorsement of the process, it compares two different cohorts of students doing two different assessments and therefore can't be taken as a reliable indicator of the overall effectiveness of using the dialogic feedback model.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The key findings of the questionnaire and focus group research are that:

- Students do not see the benefit of generic feedback and would prefer their feedback to be personalised. It is possible that this is because they are uncertain how to use generic feedback;
- in some modules only very brief feedback is being provided and in some cases only the grade/mark;
- tutors appear willing to undertake one-to-one sessions with students but when asked for pressures of work seem to make this difficult/impossible;
- students don't seem to understand the purpose of feedback, seeing it as a motivational tool rather than as advice on improvement;
- The dialogue model of assessment is very successful in encouraging positive feelings towards assessment feedback, but did not result in increased performance. This indicates that students were unclear how to use feedback effectively.

With regards to the dialogic model there is strong evidence that the interactions with staff and discussions of feedback resulted in a positive change in student perception of the quality of their learning experience. However evidence on whether or not this increases performance is limited. The researchers suspect that given longer use of the module assessment literacy would be increased and this would ultimately lead to not only more positive student evaluations but also better grades.

Recommendations from this project are as follows:

- **Recommendation 1:** While a QE approach could be taken where a minimum standard of feedback is determined at University level, the researchers feel this might be restrictive and is better left to subject groups to determine. This minimum level can then be used as a QA check by internal moderators and at Quality Review events. It will be important to ensure that if feedback falls below this subject-determined minimum level that action is taken within the group to bring feedback up to the standard required.
- **Recommendation 2:** It should be written into the feedback policy that students have a right to a meeting to discuss feedback. This needs to be clearly expressed to ensure students recognize that this is not an opportunity to negotiate grades (as the researcher has personally experienced) and given in the spirit of helping the student

develop. The researchers believe that as educators we should see the value in such meetings and make time for them. If good, constructive, clear feedback is given at the time of the assessment then there will be very few students who need to take up this opportunity.

- **Recommendation 3:** Within programme documentation when generic transferable skills are discussed there should be a requirement to develop better student understanding of the assessment process.
- **Recommendation 4:** Staff should be encouraged to include their marking scheme with the assessment brief.
- **Recommendation 5:** Monitor the result of the new assessment strategy in terms of student attainment and perception about the fairness of assessment. In particular identify how many modules have gone to single units of assessment and where this happens how students are supported with feedforward.
- **Recommendation 6:** Identify is there is a University standard expectation for particular types of assessment instrument at each level. This would help us to communicate lecturer expectations to students.

Finally, appendix 3 takes the findings from this report in terms of practical advice to tutors on the 10 key things they can do to improve feedback to students.

## Appendix 1: Questions used in questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed during class time with a clear statement about their use and the voluntary nature of filling them out. Once all results were added to a spreadsheet each result description was given a value, with the exception of 'Don't know'. Questions were worded in such a way to elicit a positive result for answers which academic staff would regard as favourable.

The Likert scale used is:

Description	Numeric value
Never	1
Almost never	2
Sometimes	3
Almost always	4
Always	5

1. The criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance
2. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
3. Feedback on my work has been prompt
4. I have received detailed comments on my work
5. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand
6. Staff always use criteria consistently
7. Staff are happy to discuss assessment requirements
8. Feedback received is useful in helping me improve work within the module
9. Feedback received is useful in helping me improve work across all modules
10. Feedback tells me where my work is good
11. The feedback I receive is personalised
12. It is unimportant if feedback is personalised
13. I always collect feedback
14. I am more interested in the grade than the feedback
15. I am more likely to pay attention to feedback if my grade is below expected
16. I tend not to return to feedback after the first day of return
17. I discuss feedback with fellow students
18. I return to feedback on an assessment when another similar piece is to be created
19. I always understand the feedback received
20. If I don't understand feedback I am comfortable asking for more information
21. I have asked a member of academic staff, other than the tutor, for help after feedback has been received
22. I have sought out additional help in areas where feedback has suggested improvements e.g. student services

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire results

Questions in the table below have been grouped by type with the question number indicating its actual place on the questionnaire.

Type	Question	Overall p1 <sup>5</sup>	Overall p2	Overall difference	Control p1	Control p2	Control Difference
Student perception	Q1	4.0	4.1	0.15	3.8	3.5	-0.26
	Q2	4.2	4.4	0.21	3.4	3.5	0.11
	Q3	2.9	4.2	1.25	3.1	3.0	-0.06
	Q6	3.6	4.0	0.43	3.3	3.2	-0.06
	Q20	3.4	3.7	0.33	3.9	3.3	-0.54
Usefulness	Q4	2.5	3.9	1.46	2.7	3.1	0.38
	Q5	3.1	4.1	1.05	3.1	3.2	0.08
	Q8	3.3	4.2	0.86	3.6	3.5	-0.11
	Q9	3.0	3.6	0.60	3.7	3.4	-0.30
	Q10	3.2	4.0	0.74	3.9	3.5	-0.40
	Q19	3.2	3.7	0.56	3.6	4.0	0.41
Personalisation	Q11	2.7	3.6	0.95	3.2	2.8	-0.34
	Q12	1.8	2.4	0.61	2.2	2.3	0.10
Student use of feedback	Q13	3.3	3.7	0.42	3.8	3.6	-0.19
	Q14	3.3	3.7	0.45	2.4	2.8	0.46
	Q15	4.2	4.2	-0.05	4.3	3.8	-0.58
	Q16	2.3	2.6	0.35	2.3	2.0	-0.32
	Q17	3.3	3.8	0.49	4.1	3.9	-0.15
	Q18	3.1	3.8	0.64	3.5	3.7	0.20
Support	Q7	3.6	4.1	0.50	4.2	4.0	-0.24
	Q21	1.9	2.3	0.41	2.1	2.6	0.52
	Q22	2.2	2.6	0.45	2.0	3.2	1.13

\*These questions originally sought a 'negative' response rather than the 'positive' response of other questions and the data have therefore been reversed in the table to be consistent with the way the other results are displayed. More detail can be provided on this.

A traffic light system has been used to highlight performance levels.

- 3.5 to 5 have been coded in green as these would be regarded as positive scores by academic staff.
- 3.49 to 3 are coded as amber to show that these need to be monitored as performance is not as good as it could be
- below 3 these are coded red showing that action needs to be taken urgently

For the 'difference' values the traffic lights have been adjusted to show as follows:

- 0.5 change in either a positive or negative direction shows as amber
- >0.5 positive change shows as green
- <-0.5 negative change shows as red.

<sup>5</sup> 'PI' = phase I i.e. at the start of the module

### Appendix 3: Practical advice for tutors

The following are the 10 top tips to consider when managing student assessment and feedback. These have been taken directly from the evidence of the research in this ATLEF project.

1. Leave time at the start of the class for questions on last week's topic
2. Provide a clinic session to enable students to seek more help and also as a dedicated time period when feedback can be given or explained on a one-to-one basis.
3. If possible, have assessments which build skills and knowledge to enable students to see how feedback can be used in a feedforward approach.
4. Use a method to encourage self-reflection e.g. peer assessment, using assessments which build on each other, ask students to provide an overview of how they have used previous feedback, get students to state which mark they think they should get and why.
5. Provide the assessment criteria with the assessment instrument to enable students to understand what you are looking for and where to concentrate their work. Discuss this criteria with students, allowing time to ask questions in the following week.
6. Feedback needs to be sufficiently detailed and provide practical advice on improvement but should not be too long. This advice can be created generically and referenced for speed of feedback while still maintaining personalisation.
7. Avoid the perception of feedback being generic. The student needs to be able to see how comments relate to his/her work.
8. Keep feedback short – 3 main good points, 3 main areas for improvement and how to make those improvements (this last section may come in the form of generic feedback to speed up return). Areas for improvement might include notification of what is missing from the work, or advice on accessing services such as Student Academic Support
9. Where there are common problems exhibited in assessments consider discussing these with the class prior to submission
10. Consider if there is value in students showcasing work-in-progress (not always appropriate depending on assessment type)