



Staff and student perceptions of feedback quality in the context of widening participation

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Executive summary

1. Background

Assessment has long been known to be central to students' perceptions of higher education: it defines the curriculum in students' eyes (Ramsden, 2003) and has a major influence on their learning – the so-called 'backwash effect' (Biggs, 2003) – being viewed as a more powerful driver than teaching in determining what students do and how they do it (Boud, 2007). However, the practice of assessment alone does not guarantee effective learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004); rather pedagogic theory conceptualises assessment as a communication process (Higgins *et al.*, 2001) in which high quality feedback is the most powerful single influence on student achievement (Hattie, 1987). Today, the provision of quality feedback is perceived as a key requirement of effective teaching (Ramsden, 2003) and is expected by students (Higgins *et al.*, 2002).

Despite this central role in teaching and learning, assessment feedback has become a major concern of higher education institutions in recent years since it has emerged as the least satisfactory aspect of student experience with low satisfaction scores over three consecutive years – 2007, 2006 and 2005 – in the UK National Student Surveys. (NSS, 2007, 2006, 2005). Students are not alone in their concerns, an analysis of reports of almost 3000 quality assurance visits over an eight-year period reveals that the QAA reviewers had commented on the "failure of a significant number of institutions to provide adequate feedback on students' work" (QAA, 2003, p.28). This consensus of dissatisfaction is compelling, but it is not a view generally shared by tutors with research confirming that lecturers often believe their feedback to be more useful than students do (Carless, 2006; Maclellan, 2001). Given the significant implications of these differing perspectives, one question urgently needs to be addressed, namely: 'what concepts of quality feedback are informing such an apparent mismatch of perceptions?'

Frameworks for good practice in assessment and feedback have been developed, but it is noteworthy that attempts to conceptualise the nature of quality feedback within higher education have been positioned within a process of formative rather than summative feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004, 2006) at a time when resource constraints coupled with mass expansion in higher education has brought about cutbacks in opportunities for formative assessment to be practised (Yorke, 2003; Gibbs, 2006).

In view of this, the title of our paper acknowledges that assessment within all higher education institutions now operates within the context of widening participation policies and practice. In reality, today increasing numbers of first-year undergraduates find themselves in large classes on courses for which summative feedback remains the dominant discourse of assessment (Boud, 2007). Faced with the challenge of teaching staff struggling with ever-increasing marking loads, it is now clear that the strategic response has often been to cut the number of student assessments (DfES, 2003; Hounsell, 2007) with the result that feedback of any kind is said to be in relative decline throughout the sector (Gibbs, 2006). This study seeks to capture staff and student perceptions of 'quality feedback', as they experience the impact of these changes within higher education.

At the same time, within the school sector an assessment for learning culture (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Sutton, 1995) has been embedded within the curriculum leading to "a marked divergence in assessment practices and in the assumptions which tend to drive them" (Murphy, 2006, p.39). While seminal research has been conducted on the assessment experience of students in schools (Black and William, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2003) and universities (Hounsell, 2003), there are few studies that investigate the impact of the former on the latter. This report presents cross-sector research that makes this connection and addresses this gap in the research literature, positioning first-year undergraduate

expectations of quality feedback within the context of their prior experience of formative assessment.

2. Aims

The main aims of the project were to:

1. investigate the impact of *prior* experiences of assessment on students' expectations of feedback practices in higher education
2. explore tutors' and students' perceptions of what is considered quality feedback and how this may vary within and across disciplines
3. analyse any changes in students' perceptions of quality feedback throughout their first-year higher education experience
4. identify barriers to providing quality feedback.

The subsidiary aims were to:

5. enable interventions to promote quality feedback and reflectively evaluate these strategies, developed in response to dialogue between subject tutors and students about feedback practice
6. improve the quality of the student learning experience by developing and reflectively evaluating a process of change to embed good practice.

3. Methods

In order to develop a detailed understanding of the perceptions and processes involved, qualitative methods were used to provide research findings with a 'deep' narrative that can usefully inform what is actually taught (Gibbs, 2002). This approach also addressed the issue that "the majority of the studies concerning students' perceptions about assessment are quantitative in nature" (Struyven *et al.*, 2005, p.12). The reliability of our findings is enhanced by the comparative approach of this multidisciplinary and cross-sector study, which meant that the perceptions of students, teachers and university tutors with diverse experiences of assessment were captured during the year-long study. In view of the scope of the study, the consistent thematic findings that emerged from such a rich dataset appear particularly compelling. As a result, it is our contention that such a qualitative approach enables us to propose recommendations of interest to the wider academic community.

The project was composed of three strands. The first strand explored student perceptions and experience of feedback (and university expectations) in sixth forms at schools and FE colleges in areas of the north-west of England. Three schools and three FE/sixth form colleges were selected. At each institution focus groups were conducted with Year 13 students (n=37), and teachers (n=13) were also interviewed. The majority of pupils were studying A-levels and all intended to enter higher education, including progression to universities not participating in the research study.

The second strand comprised student focus groups at three points in the year and tutor interviews to investigate the perceptions of feedback quality during the first-year university experience. Beginning at a university in the north of England (**N**), participants from a representative sample of geographical postcodes, were drawn from three popular subject areas: Psychology (students n=24, tutors n=4); Education Studies (students n=24, tutors n=3); and Performing Arts (students n=17, tutors n=3). A cross-institutional perspective was obtained by repeating student focus groups of Psychology students at two other universities, one in London (**L**, n=29), the other in the midlands (**M**, n=14), so that the results could be compared. A total of 108 students and ten staff were involved in focus groups and interviews during Strand 2. Since focus groups were self-selecting within the three disciplines, we also employed a questionnaire to check validity of our findings; 176 students from the three participating institutions returned questionnaire results.

The third strand consisted of negotiation with course teams to design and implement an intervention to improve feedback quality after considering the views of students and tutors. This third strand was an attempt to engage students and course teams in dialogue to develop shared understanding of the assessment and feedback processes, and to respond to each other's concerns. Focus groups were used to help gauge perceptions of feedback within the three participating disciplines: Psychology (n=7), Performing Arts (n=8) and Education Studies (n=6) at University N.

Focus group and interview data were recorded and transcribed. Three researchers independently carried out thematic analysis and subsequently collaborated through an iterative process to reach consensus. Member validation was used to verify interpretations where possible.

4. Results

4.1 Students' perceptions of what constitutes quality feedback

Almost universally in the focus groups, both further education and first-year undergraduate students expressed two purposes of feedback: a judgement of the standard reached and guidance to improve performance. Students identified a number of characteristics associated with quality feedback, but these can only be fully understood in relation to the way students conceptualised feedback as a continual process, aimed at improving their *grade* through ongoing dialogue (primarily with a teacher or tutor). This perception of an integrated process is particularly apparent in the study of experiences of school students; indeed in some schools and colleges, this is tightly coupled with considerable emphasis on preparatory guidance and continual support through the writing stage to the submission of a coursework assignment.

Students in both higher and further education perceived that this system of guidance provides quality feedback within a supportive relationship offering frequent opportunities for discussion of progress. Such feedback is perceived to be a process that predominately delivers a formative judgement of performance; this scaffolds the student's learning by identifying areas of improvement, which if actioned will achieve higher grades.

The perceptions gained through this experience of assessment in further education are taken forward into the first year of university study. Our findings reliably demonstrate that it is this experience of feedback as a dialogic, formative process that consistently informs perceptions of quality expressed by students across disciplines and within different institutions. Significantly, the findings of our iterative study reveal that these defining perceptions of quality do not change during the first year, but remain the constant benchmark by which all feedback at university is judged.

On the basis of our analysis of student perceptions of quality feedback in both further and higher education, we have modelled this process as the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (DFC) (Figure 2) comprising three sub-processes generated from the data: *preparatory guidance*, *in-task guidance* and *performance feedback* (post submission).

However, there is a considerable difference in practice at university compared to schools, most notably, with the former privileging independent or 'self-directed' learning (Knowles, 1975, p.8). Retaining perceptions of quality feedback as a formative, dialogic process, therefore, often leaves students feeling uncertain and confused about what to do, and in some cases significantly alienated from the institution and even higher education itself.

4.2 Strand 1: School/FE students' perceptions of their pre-university experiences

Analysis of students' reported experiences typically showed the following characteristics. In the preparatory guidance stage, activity centred on the discussion and guidance about assessment criteria and marking schemes. Most schools/colleges in our study set target grades for students. At the in-task guidance stage, students had access to high levels of support through teachers and often produced a number of drafts for coursework. Feedback

was provided verbally and in written form. Most students and teachers had some experience of peer assessment, although there were widely divergent perceptions of its effectiveness. After submission of the final assignment, students received written and verbal feedback. Emphasis was placed on rapid turnaround of marked work (one week was normal) and included detailed, specific comments together with examples. Students expressed high satisfaction levels with the feedback and guidance received. Eighty-nine per cent of students surveyed indicated that they paid close attention to feedback.

4.3 Teachers' and university tutors' perceptions of what constitutes quality feedback

Thirteen teachers in five schools/colleges participated in individual or group interviews discussing their perceptions of feedback and their own practice. We also interviewed ten university tutors at University *N*.

In all cases, teachers identified the purposes of feedback as being to improve performance and to communicate achievement against examination board standards, and teachers stressed the need to communicate these to their students. They saw feedback linked explicitly and in detail to the criteria identifying current performance and actions to be taken to improve.

Just as students perceived feedback as a continuous process, teachers talked in the same terms. All of the teachers reported that they had used forms of peer assessment. Self-assessment was expressed as a common aim, although it was only reported as actively being reinforced as a process by students and teachers in half the schools/colleges surveyed. All teachers interviewed reported the use of exemplars, such as previous coursework answers or past examination papers, and they placed a high emphasis on the use of drafts and a rapid turnaround in marking. They also described a culture where students received a high level of informal support outside class time.

Most teachers raised the issue of students' lack of independent study, and other problems reported were inadequate research and writing skills, the lack of reading by some students and students not acting on feedback.

University tutors reported different emphasis on the purposes of feedback and considerably divergent espoused practices. When discussing the purpose of assessment, all tutors identified *improvement in performance* as the primary function.

While all tutors recognised the importance of verbal feedback and dialogue, there was considerable variety in approaches to this, ranging from designing seminar sessions to enable the inclusion of one-to-one and group-tutor discussion, to communicating to students the time and availability of tutor surgery hours and appointments.

Most tutors (seven out of ten) also expressed the importance of specific and detailed feedback. However, every single tutor pointed to the problem of lack of time for marking and most expressed concern that they need to spend considerable time dealing with relatively basic errors in academic writing, rather than being able to focus on higher level aspects.

The most significant points to emerge from our analysis concerned the divergence in the perceptions and practice of university tutors from those of school teachers. It was particularly noticeable that all school teachers discussed quality feedback in relation to achievement against an explicit standard expressed as criteria. None of our university tutors foregrounded explicit criteria. Some tutors used tacit marking criteria, though two out of three departments published standardised assessment criteria for students. Only one tutor said that they discussed these actively with the class prior to submission of an assignment.

The second difference that stood out was the diversity of practice concerning formative assessment activities. All of the approaches identified in the study of school practices were used in one way or another, but there was no consistency, and the practices largely depended on individual tutors' beliefs. While there was acknowledgement that rapid feedback was most beneficial, in general written feedback on written coursework was

provided three to four weeks after submission, tutors citing quality assurance processes and workload as barriers to a faster turnaround.

4.4 Strand 2: Students' perceptions of first-year experiences

Our research among first-year undergraduates at three universities revealed a very different picture to that at school and college. The level of support and guidance experienced during the assessment process was much lower, especially in the first two stages of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (preparatory guidance and in-task guidance), and it did not meet students' expectations. Inconsistency and a lack of meaningful, relevant feedback and dialogue were also reported. A worrying feature was the demotivating effect that a perceived lack of quality feedback appeared to have on a significant proportion of students.

When surveyed about their expectations at university (early in their first term), 91% of students expected feedback to be given in enough time for it to be useful to them; when surveyed later (at the end of their first year) only 49% agreed that this had been their experience. Ninety-two per cent expected that feedback would help them to improve their work; only 60% felt that they had actually been able to improve as the result of feedback. Eighty-nine per cent expected to understand the feedback they were given, but only 65% agreed that they understood the feedback they actually received. In each of the above examples, it is clear that significant numbers of students do not feel that their expectations of quality feedback are being met. Sixty per cent felt they could have done with more support in writing their assignments, and only 29% of our sample agreed that feedback is better in university than that given in their previous institution. This is not to suggest that universities should adopt similar systems of feedback to FE colleges, but the dissonance between students' expectations and the actual feedback they receive is a major cause of concern for those who wish to help induct new students into HE.

4.5 Strand 3: Facilitating pedagogical change

We considered the most important feature of our approach, pioneered by Black *et al.* (2003), to be the owning of any intervention by the course team, and therefore the choice of intervention, based on student feedback, was theirs. As a consequence, we expected considerable diversity.

This philosophy entailed some risk and in the final analysis meant that data from the Psychology departments at Universities **L** and **M** could not be included at this stage. Tutors at these institutions chose interventions that aimed to further develop existing action research projects, and the different scheduling of semesters between institutions meant that the time available for the implementation of interventions differed between institutions. Therefore, it was decided that no useful comparison of the data for interventions in Psychology courses across institutions could be made. Reflections on the experience of change at Universities **L** and **M** will be used to inform further analysis of the embedding process in University **N** in future research.

Although the chosen interventions can all be characterised as providing formative feedback, the chosen strategies diverged significantly. These were:

- Performing Arts (Theatre Studies): The provision of pre- and in-task guidance through writing workshops.
- Education Studies: A pilot training session for second-year peer mentors tasked with giving feedback on first-year assignment drafts.
- Psychology: The development of a self-assessment checklist linked to core criteria and grade (and percentage) descriptors.

It was an expectation of the research design that tutors would take the lead in implementing an intervention to improve practice within each of the three disciplines. In practice this did not happen. As a result, this aspect of the project became action research for one of the project team, who, as a member of the university Writing Centre and the *Write Now* CETL,

became directly involved in implementing the agreed interventions. For this reason, a reflective account of this experience has been chosen as the most appropriate means of recording and evaluating the process of change at this stage. The points made in the reflection are informed by post-intervention interviews carried out with course leaders and students involved in the delivery of the interventions, and their evaluations have provided a degree of cross-validation. Supporting evidence for the claims made about the focus group and staff interview data can be found in the appropriate results section of this report.

The main findings of the reflection on this action research are as follows:

- The use of a dialogic approach was the most successful intervention. This enabled the research team not only to identify staff and student perceptions of feedback quality, but also to create a feedback loop in which they were shared. This proved to be the crucial first step in any attempt to facilitate changes in feedback practice.
- The interventions agreed by students and tutors related to the provision of formative feedback on writing for assessment, particularly at the pre- and in-task stages of the assignment cycle. Through dialogue there developed a shared perception, albeit to different degrees, that this is the area in which feedback quality needs to be improved.
- The professional development of staff is required to adapt existing teaching practices to enable formative assessment at the pre- and in-task stages of assessment.
- Tutors' preconceptions of 'independent learning', concerns regarding plagiarism and perceived time constraints generally proved to be a barrier to the implementation of formative activities, such as the use of drafts and exemplars.
- Students generally expressed reservations about peer and self-assessment activities, in marked contrast to current guidelines for good practice. The concerns identified were: issues of trust in unknown peers; the expectation of feedback from an 'expert' tutor; and a perceived lack of knowledge of 'what they want' leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to make such judgements.

5. Conclusions

In the last three years, the National Student Surveys have highlighted students' dissatisfaction with the quality of university tutors' feedback. The results of our research have illuminated the fault line that exists between assessment practices at school and university, and the model generated from this evidence provides the basis for an explanation of this dissatisfaction. In this section we draw together the most important findings from our results, propose suggestions for improvement and provide a rationale for our recommendations.

A distinguishing feature of this study was its focus upon the experience of students attending sixth forms and further education colleges located in areas with relatively low HE representation and three 'new' universities that have all experienced rapid expansion through their robust commitment to the widening participation agenda. In this way, we believe our conclusions and recommendations are more credible for being grounded in an informed understanding of the changes in higher education that are said to make the delivery of quality feedback so problematic; for example, the transition to larger class sizes and differing expectations of support (Race, 1996; Rust, 2001). Such an approach, we argue, enhances rather than limits the likelihood that students and staff beyond these institutions will be able to relate to our findings, especially as the challenges of assessment within the context of widening participation are now increasingly common (Gibbs, 2006; Hounsell, 2007).

5.1 Reconceptualising feedback as a guidance process

When we discussed the meaning of quality feedback with students and school teachers, they unanimously talked about continuous feedback as dialogue within a cyclical assessment process. Feedback was never considered as a single event. Our literature review also shows that the concept of quality feedback is gradually changing in the research community from that of an expert correcting a student's errors, towards a student-centred process model (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hounsell, 2006; Rust *et al.*, 2003). Reconceptualising

feedback as a process (or system), rather than an event is important since it highlights the time-dependent nature of particular feedback activities. It also corresponds to the progressive construction of meaning by students as they make progress through the process. Principles of good practice (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006) are useful, but are not enough on their own: they also need to be systematically implemented at suitable points in the cycle to be effective.

We have modelled the experiences of school students using the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (see Figure 2). This model is derived from empirical data: at each stage in this model we have identified activities and artefacts that were reported by participants, consequently we feel the model is underpinned by a strong evidence base. It builds on previous models cited above by emphasising the iterative and formative discussion at three key stages of students working through an assessed coursework task. The three stages also highlight important activities at each point, enabling the model to be used both for analysing current practice and for planning course design. While there are strong similarities between the DFC and the guidance and feedback cycle proposed by Hounsell (2006), we found little evidence of post-submission supplementary support in schools and colleges, where the emphasis on guidance and support occurred much earlier in the cycle as in-task guidance from a consistent source: the expert teacher.

Although students perceive their feedback experience as a cycle of guidance in schools, practice at the universities in our study is not aligned with this perception (see below). In schools this cycle delivers improved grades, but not self-directed learning skills; however, we do not consider this to be an intrinsic shortcoming of the cycle, on the contrary, we suggest that the cycle can also be adapted to the higher education context as a diagnostic tool and a means of scaffolding the development of self-directed learning skills.

5.2 Student perceptions of quality feedback

This project aimed to identify and analyse any changes in students' perceptions of quality feedback during their first-year experience of university. Implicit in this aim was the assumption that these perceptions would change. In fact in our study, university students' perceptions of quality feedback (norms) remained stable throughout this crucial first year, and undergraduates across three institutions and within three different disciplines continued to emphasise the same quality attributes as school or college students. Thematic analysis of transcripts from focus groups held at significant milestones consistently demonstrates that first-year undergraduates continued to perceive quality feedback as important for improvement, articulated a strong desire to receive guidance prior to the submission of an assignment, and repeatedly reported that they try to take notice of any feedback. Quality was defined as feedback that was timely, provided detailed explanatory comments and was supplemented by the opportunity for discussion, ideally one-to-one and face-to-face with tutors. A large majority of students expressed the desire that feedback should include a grade as a standard indicator and criterion-referenced comments to enable them to improve. In particular, students viewed the opportunity to discuss drafts and have access to exemplars as vital aspects of quality feedback.

The stability of these perceptions and the close relationship to school practice strongly suggest that students developed their perceptions of quality feedback at school where, as we have demonstrated, feedback is experienced as a guidance process within the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle*. Thus, students arrive at university conditioned by the experience of high levels of interaction with teachers, and a system focused on delivering improvement in performance as measured by grades. Given this prior experience, it is not surprising that feedback in higher education is found not to meet students' expectations of quality. Particular weaknesses articulated by students are identified in the first two stages of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle*: students perceived that they receive little preparatory guidance, 'what they are looking for', with few if any opportunities for formative feedback in the form of discussion of written comments made by a tutor. Further reported issues identified at Stage 3 related to:

consistency of marking by teams of tutors, timeliness of feedback and on occasions a lack of detail in written feedback.

However, undergraduates frequently referred to the school experience as 'spoon-feeding', with tutors also highlighting students' lack of independent learning skills. Thus, while quality feedback continued to be defined in relation to prior experience of a process of formative guidance, there was increasing awareness that the way in which this process was implemented in schools did little to prepare prospective entrants for the realities of assessment in higher education.

This 'assessment gap' contributes to the culture shock of arriving at university. Despite the fact that the crucial importance of feedback in learning was widely acknowledged by university tutors, the students we surveyed did not believe that feedback in the first year adequately supports them through the unfamiliar assessment practices at university, particularly as they felt they lacked the skills for independent learning. As a result, some strongly negative feelings were expressed by a small minority of students as the year progressed. Interestingly, whereas the National Student Surveys indicate final-year students' dissatisfaction regarding the quality of feedback, our findings established that this perception is already prevalent within the first three months of university experience, and we have provided evidence that this mismatch is rooted in students' preconceptions of feedback as a guidance process.

5.3 Inconsistencies in tutor perceptions of feedback practices

All teachers and university tutors (and students) alike emphasised the purpose of feedback for student improvement and learning. However, our interpretation of the interview data is that most tutors perceive feedback primarily as a post-summative assignment event rather than as a process of discussion starting with the assignment brief and criteria. The focus on explicit criteria was much more evident in schools/colleges, with some university tutors admitting to using tacit marking criteria. A striking feature of the practice reported at universities was the inconsistency of feedback methods and formative assessment practices. There was little consistency within the departments we surveyed regarding preparatory guidance, peer assessment, drafts and verbal and written practices. Given the size of our sample, it was not possible to glean any reliable evidence of differences in perceptions of quality feedback between disciplines, although Performing Arts tutors appeared to give more emphasis to verbal feedback than the other subjects surveyed. Tutors also reported receiving no training about how to provide quality feedback in the context of traditional university tuition, even though a number had completed accredited PGCTLHE courses.

The tutors we interviewed reported giving extensive and detailed written feedback on assignments and recognised the importance of motivational comments, although very few of the students who took part in the focus groups stated that this is what they received. Consequently, there is a significant mismatch between students' and tutors' perceptions of the feedback experience.

5.4 Barriers to quality feedback at university

We see this mismatch of perceptions as one of the main barriers to achieving quality feedback at university. Students are expecting detailed guidance, while tutors frequently cited the importance of independent learning. The approach used in schools and colleges is focused on delivering high grades at A-level. This is partly driven by school league tables, but the universities are also complicit: grades are used to determine access to higher education. It is difficult to see how the current high dependency school system can deliver independent learning, and given the demands to achieve high grades, teachers have stated that it is unlikely that schools and colleges will change in the near future. We therefore conclude that it is the responsibility of the universities to adapt their feedback practice in the first year to address this issue and ease the transition by taking more consideration of students' prior experience. In our view a prime aim of the first-year university curriculum

should be *explicitly to teach* students how to become self-directed learners. Providing the opportunity is not enough, the activities in the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* can be adapted to deliver self-directed learning, and since the process is familiar to students it will also enhance student confidence in their learning.

A further barrier to quality feedback is the reduction in the unit of resource with the expansion of higher education. This has led to a reduction and possible removal of formative assessment from courses and reduced timeliness, quality and quantity of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004).

The feedback activities valued highly by students are those related to formative assessment, in particular drafts and exemplars. Tutors may lavish hours of written feedback comments, but these are mainly on summative assessment (Stage 3 of the DFC). Tutors also comment that students often do not even collect such assignments and do not attend to comments. This contradicts the students' own assertion that they value and take notice of feedback. However, the two statements are not necessarily mutually exclusive – students may see relevant comments as those they can use to improve immediate performance: that is formative draft feedback. Our evidence suggests comments are ignored where they are perceived as irrelevant or too late, which is usually when it occurs on the summative component of an assignment.

One approach that could mitigate resource issues is the use of peer and self-assessment, and perhaps the most important benefit of this approach is that stated by Boud and Falchikov (2007), who argue that developing these abilities is one of the keys to self-directed learning and sustainable assessment. A naive analysis could therefore see peer assessment as the silver bullet that addresses the weakness of self-directed learning, while accommodating the decrease in unit of resource. However, our results showed peer assessment was not popular among first-year students; issues of trust, perceived expertise and competence were major concerns. Thus, a further major challenge is the design of curricula to teach students how to perform peer (and self-) assessment effectively.

5.5 Facilitating change

It was significant that the interventions agreed by students and tutors related to the provision of formative feedback on writing for assessment, particularly at the pre- and in-task stages of the assignment cycle. We conclude from this that through dialogue there developed a shared perception, albeit to different degrees, that this was the area in which feedback quality needs to be improved. Reflecting upon the process by which formative assessment can become embedded in the school curriculum, Black *et al.* (2003) observed at the conclusion of their own research that if students are to take responsibility for their learning they must be shown how to do this; teachers cannot just make this happen “just by wishing” (p.84). In discussing the three interventions to be made, tutors acknowledged a need to structure assessment activities far more than they had hitherto believed necessary.

Tutors expressed the urgent need for professional development to enable them to ‘front load’ their teaching practice, to provide the pre- and in-task guidance that students increasingly expect, and to develop strategies for scaffolding self-directed learning through peer and self-assessment. There were also concerns as to the time consuming nature of feedback on drafts and requests for help to resolve this. Exemplars were seen by some as problematic, given concerns regarding plagiarism and the need for originality in higher education. In particular, there were frequent reservations that formative activities, such as drafts and exemplars, could constitute *spoon-feeding* and that the provision such support would contribute to what has been referred to as “a dumbing down” of ‘*independent learning*’ (Haggis, 2006, p.522).

However, the term ‘independent learning’ is problematic in itself (O’Doherty, 2006), both from the point of view of being ill-defined and its connotation of “going it alone” (Knight, 1996, p.35).

Our conclusion is that such perceptions form a barrier to the embedding of what is perceived as quality feedback by students and also draws attention to the urgent need for a wider debate as to what is meant by the concept of independent learning in higher education today

One surprising finding emerged from this aspect of the research: students generally proved reluctant or expressed themselves unable to engage in peer or self-assessment; despite the fact that peer assessment at least seemed to be a relatively common experience in school settings. Issues of trust in unknown peers, the expectation of feedback from an 'expert' tutor and a perceived lack of knowledge of 'what they want' leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to make such judgements all played a part. Again, we conclude that there is an urgent need for a structured introduction to these activities with the explicit development of peer and self-assessment skills.

These are strategies that are recommended as good practice; only by dialogue with students did we learn of their reservations and perceptions of possible limitations, and this in turn led to an attempt to implement them more effectively. In the final analysis, therefore, we conclude that it was the dialogic approach that proved to be the key intervention. This enabled the research team not only to identify staff and student perceptions of feedback quality, but also to create a feedback loop in which they were shared. This proved to be the crucial first step in any attempt to facilitate changes in feedback practice.

6. Recommendations

In the light of our findings, a number of issues identified during our review of current assessment practice can now be usefully be reframed. For example, the literature review highlights the problem of student engagement with feedback, yet our research revealed few activities within university courses that are designed to involve students actively in these aspects of assessment, and the problem is further aggravated by the mismatch in assessment culture between school and higher education. The former is based on high levels of formative assessment and dialogue; the latter is primarily based on summative assessment, written feedback and an assumption that students possess self-directed learning skills. It is this mismatch in perceptions that constitutes a significant barrier to improving the quality of feedback.

At the outset of this report we drew attention to the fact that the title, and therefore the focus, of our study acknowledged the context of widening participation that now frames the assessment practices of all higher education institutions. Our study has clearly shown that for tutors, a rapid expansion and diversification of higher education at the same time as a significant reduction of the unit of resource (Gibbs, 2006) has simply exacerbated the challenges of meeting student expectations of quality feedback. However, as one teacher in our study observed, universities need to adapt to the situation created by mass higher education or retreat back to an elite system. From this perspective, the use of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (DFC) appears to be not so much part of the problem, but a possible solution.

Our recommendations for improving the quality of feedback to students in first-year university classes, therefore, are based primarily on the need to redesign curricula explicitly to embed formative assessment activities by refocusing effort to deliver more during the first two stages of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (the provision of pre- and in-task guidance) and saving time by reducing summative assessment feedback at Stage 3 (post submission). In particular we suggest that courses should:

6.1 Explicitly teach self-directed learning skills

The need to develop independent learning skills has been acknowledged by students and highlighted by teachers and university tutors. However, the term 'independent learning' is problematic in itself (O'Doherty, 2006), both from the point of view of being ill-defined and its connotation of "going it alone" (Knight, 1996, p.35). We much prefer the term "self-directed learning" (Knowles, 1975, p.18) since it implies active engagement and initiative by the

learner without the isolation of independence. However, whichever term is used, the first requirement is for university tutors to articulate clearly what they expect of students. Once this is clear, first-year curricula require redesign actively to teach these skills.

Since students arrive at university without these skills, and they cannot be expected to absorb them by osmosis, skill development needs scaffolding to enable the transition of students from the familiar, high levels of interaction they experienced at school, towards the self-directed behaviour desired by university.

6.2 Refocus effort on Stages 1 and 2 of the feedback cycle

- **Stage 1: Integrate students more effectively into an agreed academic community of practice through ‘front loading’ feedback as preparatory guidance**

Once again this requires redesign of aspects of the course, to build in time for workshops that engage students with assessment criteria and discussion of exemplars (Rust, 2003). Although Rust reported that self-assessment skills had not improved when students attended a single workshop, we would advocate the repeated application of the method throughout the year to reinforce the application of learning.

- **Stage 2: Encourage staff/student engagement with formative feedback to maximise ‘feedforward’: viewing feedback as a single event does not enhance the student experience**

Our research shows clear evidence that students will act on feedback on drafts at Stage 2 of the DFC, and attempt to ‘close the gap’ (Sadler, 1989). However, the issue of drafts is contentious, since it is highly time consuming for the tutor to mark. The ‘obvious’ answer seems to be peer assessment, although this needs careful introduction to overcome student opposition and potential issues of plagiarism and gaming behaviour identified earlier in the report.

6.3 Professional development for university tutors: sharing good practice

A further recommendation arises from the huge variation in formative assessment and feedback practice that we discovered among university tutors. While a number of tutors had completed PGCTLHE courses, only two identified specific guidance or training to give feedback, and that was from experience with the Open University. We strongly recommend that universities identify good practice in their local contexts and disseminate through CPD. In our opinion, such staff development should incorporate the points identified in 6.1 and 6.2, in particular to enable tutors to:

- understand the prior assessment feedback experience of school students (the DFC)
- design courses to scaffold the development of self-directed learning skills
- incorporate formative feedback as in-task guidance, such as tutor/peer assessment of drafts
- incorporate activities to engage students with assessment criteria, such as use of exemplars.

The DFC could have a useful role to play in such CPD, both as a diagnostic tool for analysing current practice and as a framework in which to place context-specific feedback activities.

6.4 Further research

This research has identified a number of features of school and university assessment processes that help to explain the continuing dissatisfaction with current feedback practice recorded in the NSS. The level of detail provided by the qualitative analysis has led to a model of the feedback process that has the potential to have considerable impact on the

improvement of university feedback practice. While the methods used in the study are robust, we acknowledge that its range is limited with regard to the type of university and number of disciplines included in the project. Given the importance of the feedback issue, further research is needed to ascertain whether the conclusions can be extrapolated to other settings and disciplines.

This study has also highlighted the need for further research to establish effective and efficient means of assisting students to manage the transition from the high dependency assessment culture of schools and colleges, to the self-directed learning community within universities. In view of this we propose the need to:

- develop an assessment curriculum, based upon differentiated iterations of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle*. Using a constructivist perspective the starting point will be students' prior experience of assessment in further education
- establish an evidence base for formative activities that scaffold increasing self-direction in learning by developing a student's ability to self-assess. Of particular interest is peer assessment, which appears to have significant potential (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, students in our study expressed considerable reservations about a strategy often proposed as good practice. Therefore, we consider that it is important to explore this approach in more detail and establish how it can be effectively put into practice to achieve these aims.

The National Student Surveys (2005 to 2007) have consistently demonstrated that the quality of feedback is perceived to be the least satisfactory aspect of higher education today. Our study provides a cross-sector, evidence-based explanation of these results, and from this informed perspective we recommend suggestions for improvement. Improving the quality of feedback by ensuring that it provides guidance and scaffolds independent learning has the potential to transform both the student experience of transition to higher education and the students' approach to learning within it, providing sustainable benefits beyond graduation.

1. Background

1.1 Introduction

Assessment has long been known to be central to students' perceptions of higher education: it defines the curriculum in students' eyes (Ramsden, 2003) and has a major influence on their learning – the so-called “backwash effect” (Biggs, 2003) – being viewed as a more powerful driver than teaching in determining what students do and how they do it (Boud, 2007). However, the practice of assessment alone does not guarantee effective learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004); rather pedagogic theory conceptualises assessment as a communication process (Higgins *et al.*, 2001) in which feedback is identified as of crucial importance to both learning and teaching since, “action without feedback is completely unproductive for the learner” (Laurillard, 2002, p.55). Therefore, feedback is “a fundamental characteristic of responsible and responsive learning systems” (Sadler, 1998, p.79) if “deep learning” is to be developed (Biggs, 2003). Today, with research consistently demonstrating that “high quality feedback is the most powerful single influence on student achievement” (Hattie, 1987; Black and Wiliam, 1998), the provision of quality feedback is perceived as a key requirement of effective teaching (Ramsden, 2003) and is expected by students (Higgins *et al.*, 2002).

Despite this central role in teaching and learning, assessment feedback has become a major concern of higher education institutions in recent years since it has emerged as the least satisfactory aspect of student experience with low satisfaction scores over three consecutive years (2007, 2006 and 2005) in the UK National Student Survey (NSS, 2007, 2006, 2005). These results have captured national attention, not least because until now feedback has frequently escaped evaluation in external quality assurance audits, so its apparent decline has been difficult to detect (Gibbs, 2006). While it can be argued that “quality is a more complex concept than traditional assessment criteria suggest” (Bryan and Clegg, 2006, p.3), it needs to be acknowledged that it is not just students who are concerned: an analysis of reports of almost 3000 quality assurance visits over an eight-year period reveals that the QAA reviewers had commented on the “failure of a significant number of institutions to provide adequate feedback on students' work” (QAA, 2003, p.28). This consensus of dissatisfaction is compelling, but it is not a view generally shared by tutors, with research confirming that lecturers often believe their feedback to be more useful than students do (Carless, 2006; Maclellan, 2001). Given the significant implications of these differing perspectives, one question urgently needs to be addressed, namely: what concepts of quality feedback are informing such an apparent mismatch of perceptions? In an effort to contribute to the current debate on feedback quality, this fundamental question became the starting point of our research.

In seeking to go beyond the findings of the National Student Survey, this qualitative study aimed to generate dialogue that would give voice to the often complex and problematic context of widening participation within which assessment in higher education now takes place. Warnings of “engine failure” in this assessment system have been given for over a decade (Race, 1996 [online]), accompanied by predications that a continued rapid expansion and diversification of higher education driven by a reduction in unit costs (staff-student ratios and funding per student) would be detrimental, and the first casualty would be “the amount and quality of feedback” as the demands upon staff time increased (Rust, 2001, p.4). Today, the greatest threat to quality standards in higher education is considered to come from this reduction in feedback (Gibbs, 2006), as both students and tutors are seen to be caught in a downward spiral in which diminishing feedback is valued less by students, and staff perceive that they are less able to make a difference to student learning through feedback. In such a context, it is argued the sustainability of quality feedback practice is under threat (Hounsell, 2007).

In response to this challenge our research aimed first to explore the concept of ‘quality feedback’ in depth from the perspective of both students' and tutors' experience of

assessment in order to identify the types of feedback that students valued and the possible barriers that tutors face in attempting to meet this need. The project then aimed to facilitate possible improvement in feedback practice through the development of agreed interventions, following dialogue between tutors and students. This latter approach builds on work by Rust *et al.* (2003), Norton *et al.* (2005) and Harrington *et al.* (2006), who have all demonstrated the effectiveness of actively engaging students in the feedback process. For example, by bringing together students and lecturers to participate in a reflexive and collaborative dialogue through which they can co-construct the meanings of assessment criteria, students thereby gain a greater sense of autonomy within an assessment system that might otherwise seem alienating and intimidating. In exploring this process of change, the research aimed to contribute to the ongoing debate on the effective implementation of innovation in assessment practice (Black *et al.*, 2003; Boud and Falchikov, 2007) to stem what is otherwise seen as “a vicious and downwards spiral” into “simple and crude basics” (Gibbs, 2006, p.21).

A distinguishing feature of this project is the focus on the crucial period of transition between school and higher education. We examined students’ experiences of assessment feedback prior to university entry, and their expectations and experiences of feedback at university, and identified two markedly different assessment approaches. Significantly, student experience of this gap was found to be influential in forming judgements relating to the quality of course feedback articulated by first-year undergraduates. An informed understanding of students’ experience of feedback as a formative process of guidance in schools and sixth form settings has enabled us to propose a conceptual model, the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (DFC) to help tutors understand and address the levels of dissatisfaction with feedback quality highlighted in the National Student Surveys (2007, 2006, 2005).

We advocate the implementation of a similar system of *feedforward* guidance in the first year of university, but an awareness of the importance of independent learning in higher education, as articulated by university tutors, leads us to argue that this process needs to be adapted to scaffold students’ progression towards self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975, p.18). Such a system, we argue, is sustainable and could offer tutors and first-year undergraduates the opportunity to experience an assessment process in which both parties would perceive they were engaging with quality feedback. From our cross-sector research, we identify a cycle of guidance activities that further education students often experience in the preparation and submission of an assignment. The systematic, integrated and transparent nature of this process appears to enhance the student experience of assessment. Therefore, we propose that attention be given in higher education to the planning and development of a curriculum of differentiated assessment activities, which will enable tutors explicitly and progressively to develop students’ self-evaluative skills within their course modules and across their degree studies to graduation.

The six sections of this report chart the development of our evidence-based recommendations and present the research that informs them. Following the current introduction, subsequent sections position our research within the national context of widening participation and review the literature on assessment feedback, before going on to outline the aims and design of the research project. After presenting and analysing our findings, including relevant themes from the interview and focus group data, they are discussed in detail and the conclusions presented within the context of recent research. Finally, we draw together a number of recommendations for improving the quality of feedback in first-year undergraduate courses, thereby contributing to the current debate as to how the student experience can be enhanced.

1.2 National and institutional context

Nationally, there has been increasing concern over the quality of assessment feedback, highlighted in the UK by the National Student Surveys (NSS, 2007, 2006, 2005) and the Quality Assurance Agency subject reviews (QAA, 2003). Frameworks for good practice in assessment and feedback have been developed, but it is noteworthy that attempts to conceptualise the nature of quality feedback within higher education have been positioned

within a process of formative rather than summative feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004) at a time when resource constraints coupled with mass expansion in higher education has brought about cutbacks in opportunities for formative assessment to be practised (Yorke, 2003; Gibbs, 2006).

At the same time, within the school sector an assessment for learning culture (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Sutton, 1995) has been embedded within the curriculum leading to “a marked divergence in assessment practices and in the assumptions which tend to drive them” (Murphy, 2006, p.39). It is this conceptual gap between educational sectors that first-year undergraduates must negotiate. Although Yorke has usefully highlighted the link between formative assessment and retention of first-year undergraduates, the reason why many school-leavers are said to be “unprepared or unready for the experience of higher education” (2001, p.116) is underexplored in relation to their prior experience of feedback, with the impact of a transition to assessment in the “more detached environment of higher education” considered only in relation to access students (Yorke, 2003, p.489). This report presents research that addresses this gap in the research literature, positioning student expectations of quality feedback within the context of their prior experience of formative assessment in schools and sixth form colleges of further education.

Such prior experience means that the transition between assessment cultures is often a significant change, as widely felt pressures on higher education continue to militate against the embedding of formative assessment (Yorke, 2003). As universities have attempted to implement the widening participation policies of successive governments over the last two decades, the large expansion of higher education has only been made possible in practice by reducing unit costs, with funding per student halved in real terms over the past 15 years in England. Consequently, as numbers of students have increased staff-student ratios have deteriorated (Gibbs, 2006), and with the increasing diversity of the student population brought about through widening participation initiatives, academics have experienced a significant increase in the assessment workload (Race, 1996). Responses to these increased demands have included a decrease in the number of coursework assignments, and a reduction in the opportunities for interactions in tutorials (DfES, 2003); a situation exacerbated by the development of modularised and semesterised curriculum structures, which ‘end load’ assessment (Hounsell, 2007) at a time when an increasingly diverse student body requires “more feedback on their learning, not less” (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.9). As there have been economies of scale in teaching but few economies of scale in assessment (Gibbs, 2006), this has led in turn to a “decline in the provision of guidance and feedback on assessed work” throughout the sector (Hounsell, 2008, p.3).

In the face of such stark realities, Race (1995) strikes a more positive note, pointing out that the challenge of increased student numbers and assessment workloads can also be viewed as an opportunity to conduct a radical review of assessment practices. In an era of performance indicators and funding restraints, anything less, observes Mantz Yorke, is “both unacceptable and institutionally inadvisable” (2001, p.122). Whichever way you choose to view the situation the question remains: can high quality feedback that promotes learning be sustained within the current context of continual expansion in higher education? Such tensions cannot be ignored in any study of assessment practice within higher education today; therefore, the title of our paper reflects our decision to clearly position our research within a widening participation context, so that its findings can make an informed contribution to the ongoing debate.

The institutional settings for this study are therefore significant. One strand of the research centred on a university in the north-west of England, noted for its diverse student body and its commitment to widening participation. Here the study involved first-year undergraduate students and tutors in three different disciplines, selected for their popularity and for the demographic diversity of their students: namely, Psychology, Education Studies and Performing Arts. Smaller-scale studies were also conducted at universities in the south-east and midlands in the single first-year subject area of Psychology. These institutions have also

experienced rapid expansion through a vigorous commitment to widening participation, and their participation provided an element of validation to the main research project.

In a further strand of the research, teachers and students from six schools and FE colleges in the north-west also participated in the study. These educational institutions were selected as being in areas of relatively low participation in higher education (Blackburn, Wigan, Liverpool and Bury), but had a proven track record in progressing students to universities throughout the UK.

Given the scope of our study, therefore, we believe our findings are more credible for being grounded in an informed understanding of the changes in higher education that are said to make the delivery of quality feedback so problematic; for example, the transition to larger class sizes and differing expectations of support (Race, 1996; Rust, 2001). Such an approach, we argue, enhances rather than limits the likelihood that students and staff beyond these institutions will be able to relate to our findings, especially as the challenges of assessment within the context of widening participation are now increasingly common (Gibbs, 2006; Hounsell, 2007).

1.3 Literature review

In this section, we analyse the theoretical concepts of assessment feedback presented in the literature that have contributed to our understanding of the development of feedback practices and critically evaluate prevailing concepts of quality feedback. Since our research focuses upon the assessment experience and expectations of first-year university undergraduates and is designed to take into account prior experiences at school or sixth form college, we draw on literature that examines both school and university practice, and consider issues of transition.

It is generally accepted that constructive feedback is essential for improving performance. In the higher education setting Hounsell (2007) claims that feedback can enhance learning in three significant ways: by accelerating learning; by optimising the quality of what is learned; and by raising individual and collective attainment. According to Gibbs and Simpson, feedback is conventionally conceptualised as an issue of “knowledge of results” or the “correction of errors” (2004, p.17). In practice, the term ‘feedback’ can be applied to a range of assessment activities; from the provision of a final grade for certification in summative assessment, a process described by Sadler (1989) as essentially passive with no immediate impact upon learning, to the delivery of extensive comments upon a draft that then requires the active involvement of the student to progress learning, otherwise known as formative assessment.

The capacity of high stakes summative assessment to generate quality feedback through the process of producing awards, grade points and classifications, is now being vigorously challenged, with Knight persuasively arguing that as currently practised, it is both “deeply flawed and not conducive to future learning” (2006, p.72). In stark contrast, the impact of formative feedback on learning is held to have been convincingly validated by Black and Wiliam (1998), whose review of over 250 studies across all educational sectors demonstrates that feedback within a framework of formative assessment enhances both learning and achievement, although they are keen to emphasise that the quality of this feedback is critical to the success of any formative assessment.

In view of these differing perceptions of value embedded within the assessment literature, it is significant that attempts to conceptualise the nature of quality feedback within higher education have been positioned within a process of formative rather than summative feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004). However, a closer reading reveals evident conflict between theory and practice as these frameworks for good feedback have been presented at a time when it is claimed formative feedback has been marginalised from the dominant discourse of assessment, which remains related to summative, certification and measurement (Boud, 2007). As feedback remains relatively unexplored (Higgins *et al.*, 2002) we were, therefore, interested to discover through our

research whether tutors and first-year undergraduates also privileged formative feedback, and to determine if tensions between perceptions of quality feedback and reality were reflected in their experience of assessment practices in higher education.

That first-year undergraduates expect to receive formative feedback is made more likely by the fact that within the school and sixth form sector an 'assessment for learning' culture (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Sutton, 1995) has been embedded within the curriculum. That these expectations are unlikely to be met is highlighted by a review of both sectors, which concludes that "the two systems have very little in common" (Murphy, 2006, p.40). These hypotheses are tested through our in-depth study over one academic year, during which time the influence of this apparent cultural gap in assessment on perceptions of feedback quality was explored. In this way, a major limitation of the National Student Survey is addressed, for although this informs us of the level of dissatisfaction of final-year undergraduates, the results give no indication of when students begin to be concerned about the quality of feedback they receive. If this dissatisfaction can be identified as beginning early in the first year, then establishing a correlation between such perceptions and students' prior experience of feedback practice becomes possible.

The National Student Survey, by the very nature of its brief, does not allow for cross comparisons with staff perceptions of the quality of their feedback. Yet behind these statistics lies research that shows tutors believe their feedback is more useful than students do (Carless, 2006; Maclellan, 2001). This raises the intriguing question, explored in our research, as to what possible schema of "high value and low value" feedback (Hounsell, 2007, p.103) informs staff perceptions of their assessment practice, and whether their perceptions map on to current theoretical frameworks for good feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004). One further problem not highlighted by the National Student Survey is that of student engagement with feedback; yet Gibbs and Simpson, while proposing conditions to promote quality feedback, remind us that feedback is a two-way communication process, and that even with the provision of feedback that is "lovingly crafted and provided promptly", the reality is that "it is not inevitable that students will read and pay attention" (2004, p.20).

Several studies reveal what many tutors have long known, but the National Student Surveys do not acknowledge: that some "students fail to act upon feedback, sometimes to the extent of not collecting their assessed work" (Mutch, 2003, p.26; O'Moore, 2007); that there is considerable variation in the uptake of feedback depending upon students own sense of self-efficacy (Dweck, 2000); and that even when comments are read by students, there is evidence to suggest that they do little with them (Ding, 1998). Such findings are seemingly at odds with the perception of students as consumers of higher education eager to read feedback (Higgins *et al.*, 2002), who recognise the value of feedback in improving learning (Weaver, 2006) and therefore want good feedback (Carless, 2006). However, this contradiction does draw attention to the possibility that students are dissatisfied with the quality of feedback because they cannot, rather than will not, respond to comments.

Recent research seems to support this thesis, as time after time studies reveal an apparent erosion of undergraduate belief in the quality of tutorial feedback due to numerous barriers (for example, lack of clarity (Ivanic *et al.*, 2000; Chanock, 2000), lack of transparency (Lillis and Turner, 2001), the perceived failure to provide opportunities for formative dialogue (Hyland, 2000; Crook *et al.*, 2006) or because modularised courses are characteristically 'end loaded' with summative feedback that is often irrelevant or too late to be of practical use (Hounsell, 2007)), and the process of assessment itself offers little guidance (Weaver, 2006). While Streyven *et al.* (2005) cautions that any differences in findings can be accounted for by local teaching-learning environments, what is remarkable about this research is the frequency with which the same value judgements reappear. The question raised by these accounts of local practices (Knight, 2006) is whether these perceptions of the barriers to quality feedback can be generalised across disciplines, higher education institutions, and even across educational sectors. Our research, therefore, aimed to discover if first-year

undergraduates shared common conceptions of quality feedback, including a shared understanding of the barriers to achieving this in practice.

A reading of the literature reveals, however, that there is an increasing trend for tutors to interpret students' apparent reluctance to engage with assessment as further evidence that "students struggle to cope with the independent and self-directed style of learning expected by higher education tutors" (Wilde *et al.*, 2006, p.2). At the same time, tutors across education sectors are articulating concerns about the possibility of 'learned dependence', whereby assessment practices encourage students "to be dependent on the teacher" (Boud, 1995, p.39) and to develop an extreme instrumentalism in learning (Wilde *et al.*, 2006, p.2). At the heart of the current debate about quality feedback in higher education is the cultural expectation that self-directed learning is required at university (Northedge, 2005, p.19; Cottrell, 2003, p.11) and that summative assessment is perceived as "a test of independence" (Yorke, 2003, p.497).

The concept of independent learning is not new but for Knight it is misleading, for "independence is a goal, not a starting point" (1996, p.35). Thus, it is argued there is a paradox inherent in the pedagogy of higher education, namely that the development of student autonomy requires a process of constructivist scaffolding through formative feedback (Knight, 1996, p.11). However, the problem, argues Yorke, is that higher education is based upon a "set of assumptions in which the subject discipline, rather than student development, is dominant" (2003, p.492). This would appear to have significant implications for the embedding of assessment good practice (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004), which judges feedback quality in relation to the opportunities provided to develop and improve performance (Boud, 2000; Yorke, 2003); for example, through the submission of drafts or the discussion of the meaning of assessment criteria. Therefore, in discussions with staff and students to determine their perceptions of quality feedback, we were alert to the potential barriers posed by differing expectations of student autonomy and noted the opportunities provided in higher education to develop progressively the capacity for "informing judgement" (Boud and Falchikov, 2007, p.187).

What emerges clearly from the literature is that tensions currently exist in higher education in attempting to balance students' need for guidance and support through feedback and expectations of student autonomy. For example, 'front loading' a discussion of disciplinary practices prior to assessment has to be defended against possible accusations of 'spoon-feeding' (Haggis, 2006). This is a significant misreading of the distinctive theory that informs formative feedback, its primary aim being progressively and explicitly to develop students' evaluative and self-assessment skills through engagement in the feedback process, so that "the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself" (Sadler, 1989, p.121). This is a far from passive process and requires both tutors and students to engage in a collaborative dialogue to develop shared meaning. That such a process of collective enquiry can be perceived as "dumbing down" (Haggis, 2006, p.533) provides support for the argument that the relative lack of relevant professional development needs to be urgently addressed if assessment in higher education is to be brought into the 21st century (Elton and Johnson, 2002, p.94). In undertaking our research, therefore, we were keen to explore possible connections between tutors' perceptions of quality feedback and any training in assessment practice they had received.

An important contribution to such professional development has been made by the presentation by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) of a theoretical model of good feedback practice. This usefully synthesises recent research and demonstrates the conceptual change that has taken place in assessment theory, from a transmission perspective, which presupposes the possibility of transparent communication, to a constructivist approach (Laurillard, 2002) in which students are assumed actively to construct their own understanding of feedback. In this system, the student is given an active and central role in the feedback process, constructing their own interpretation of the task and formulating corresponding goals, known tactics and strategies for achieving this. Monitoring their own

performance generates internal feedback that identifies gaps in performance and regulates actions to enable progress towards the standard to be achieved. If external feedback is provided, this comes from a variety of sources: not only from the tutor, but also, for example, from peers. Critically, this model acknowledges the possibility that alternative meanings can be generated, as feedback information must be interpreted and internalised before it can be used to influence subsequent learning (Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw, 2000).

Several points are worthy of note: first, this theoretical model responds to research findings that the process of communication in giving feedback is inherently problematic and therefore its 'internal' dynamics must be foregrounded in any attempt to further our understanding (Higgins *et al.*, 2001). From this perspective the decontextualised National Student Survey results are severely limited, but our research methodology was dialogic and took as its starting point an investigation of tutors' and students' own personal interpretations of quality feedback within the context of local practices. This in turn led to an exploration of whether students and tutors shared a common evaluation of the characteristics of quality feedback and an attempt to assess to what extent these perceptions reflected current frameworks of good feedback practice.

Secondly, a guiding principle of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's conceptual model is the idea that the quality of feedback should be judged on its ability to empower students through the gradual development of their own evaluative skills, so that they become capable of self-assessment (Sadler, 1989, 1998; Yorke, 2003). There is a growing argument that the transformation of students' role in feedback through the development of their evaluative capacity for "informed judgement" (Boud, 2007, p.19) is key to developing sustainable feedback that has 'high value', including a long-lasting impact beyond graduation. In view of this, students' and tutors' perceptions of the role of feedback in developing the self-regulated learner, through the use of such strategies as peer assessment, became an important strand of our research.

Finally, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's feedback model focuses attention upon what Gibbs calls "the crucial variable" (2006, p.26): namely, the quality of student engagement with feedback. This provides a useful reminder that no matter what the quality of the feedback, unless it is used to improve subsequent learning, the feedback loop is not completed and feedback cannot be said to have taken place (Sadler, 1989). The National Student Survey makes no attempt to capture whether this vital criterion of quality feedback has been fulfilled, so our research made a point of asking this question, giving students an opportunity to discuss if feedback had proved useful in future learning, and tutors the chance to reflect upon how they monitored whether their feedback had been used.

The interrogative nature of academic life is held to be its most distinctive characteristic (Barnett, 2007); therefore, a particular interesting feature of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's model (2004) is the conceptualisation of feedback as dialogue, thereby addressing the issue of students not understanding the feedback given by tutors (Carless, 2006; Haggis, 2006). This approach positions feedback within a micro-teaching context, considerably removed from the delayed comments on summative assignments, which currently characterise higher education assessment (Gibbs, 2006) and where Crook *et al.* (2006) highlight the dissociation of author (tutor) and reader (student) as a source of significant discontent. Here a comparison with the school sector is instructive; Black *et al.* (2003) have influenced the way in which questioning techniques are used to enrich formative assessment discourse within classrooms, and teachers will be familiar with policies to develop effective learning through classroom talk in primary schools, based upon Alexander's (2006) research into dialogic teaching. This identifies five principles that appear relevant to the wider education sector: namely, that classroom discussion needs to be (p.14):

- *collective*: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class
- *reciprocal*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints
- *supportive*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over wrong answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings
- *cumulative*: teachers and children build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry
- *purposeful*: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view.

Consideration of the opportunities for such “assessment dialogues” (Carless, 2006, p.230) or “dialogues of participation” (Lillis, 2006, p.33) within daily learning and teaching activities usefully refocuses attention upon the possibilities of situated feedback (Laurillard, 2002; Hounsell, 2003) within higher education, as opposed to the more usual external feedback that occurs outside timetabled activities. Rust (2001) has long advocated “front-ending” and “do it in class” (p.3) as effective strategies to help deal with the challenge of attempting to deliver quality feedback when assessing large groups. More recently, studies have highlighted the potential of technology to enable a more dialogic approach to feedback (Boyle, 2004; Draper, 2004) and of the capacity of “collaborative and on-display assignments” to promote peer feedback and accelerate learning (Hounsell, 2007, p.189) within the context of large undergraduate courses.

However, implicit in Hounsell's (2007) advocacy of such interventions is a note of warning that their implementation necessitates rethinking more traditional definitions of feedback in higher education and breaking established conventions in offering alternatives to tutor feedback. If these innovations are not accepted the implications are significant, as strategies such as peer and self-assessment are viewed as not only pedagogically desirable (Sadler, 1989), but vital if the student experience is to be enhanced through sustainable feedback (Boud and Falchikov, 2007). One important issue investigated in our research, therefore, was the question: are such strategies likely to be perceived as feedback and valued alike by tutors and students?

However, changing the practice of learning and teaching is not easy, and the literature anticipates that changing the practice of assessment can be for many “the hardest thing they have ever done in their careers” (William, 2006, p.15). In an effort to explore this process, a model of change management in assessment pioneered in schools by Black *et al.* (2003) was used to inform pilot interventions within the selected disciplines in higher education. After tracking both students and tutors through the first semester at all three universities, they were asked through a process of dialogue to identify, implement and participate in an agreed intervention to improve feedback practice across all three disciplines. A reflection upon this process, together with a discussion of the implications for the future development of feedback practice, is presented in Section 4.5 of our report.

Having established the importance of feedback for effective learning and explored concepts of feedback put forward in assessment literature, we turn now critically to evaluate the principles and conditions of good feedback practice that have been published. In developing his own theory of formative assessment, Sadler (1989) identified three conditions that need to be satisfied for learners to benefit from feedback; in summary, the learner must:

1. possess a concept of the *standard* (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for
2. compare the *actual* (or current) *level of performance* with the standard
3. engage in appropriate *action* which leads to some closure of the gap. (p.121)

In addition, Sadler established two further criteria of quality feedback, namely that the ultimate goal of any feedback system should be to help students develop self-evaluative expertise and that there must be evidence that the feedback loop has been completed with the information being used to progress student learning.

Sadler's model requires the teacher and learner to have a shared understanding of the assessment standards required. However, in practice this is difficult to achieve, since a tutor's understanding of such standards is based on their expertise within a well-established membership of a community of practice and comprises a good deal of tacit knowledge gained through experience and sharing (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Higgins (2000, 2001, 2002) identifies this issue of shared understanding as a major barrier for students and highlights that it is also discipline dependent: each discipline has its own discourse, often defined tacitly, which students struggle to come to terms with, and this can be particularly confusing for those on joint honours degree courses. Moreover, teacher-generated standards criteria are often codified and require expertise to interpret, so the problem of developing a common understanding and interpretation of criteria is not limited to students, as it is also not unusual for tutors to interpret the same grading criteria differently (Case, 2007). Significantly, the issue of shared interpretation highlighted by Sadler lies at the heart of all subsequent frameworks of good feedback practice, with the result that they are all, to some degree, problematic.

Following on from Sadler's conditions for formative feedback, attention has been given to defining the context in which good feedback practice is possible. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004, 2006) identify and elaborate on seven principles developed from research literature on formative assessment. Good feedback practice is defined as assessment that:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching. (p.205)

In contrast to Sadler, the focus here is not on the learner and the use of feedback, but on the tutor and the production of quality feedback. Yet again there is a problem of interpretation; for example, the concept of 'high quality information' is highly context dependent. Moreover, principle six is open to the same criticism: providing an opportunity for action does not direct that the learner actually does something, for, as Sadler (1998) points out: "it cannot simply be assumed that when students are 'given feedback' they will know what to do with it" (p.78). We see this scope for differing perceptions of such principles as a critical point.

Gibbs and Simpson (2004) offer a more detailed response in presenting their conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. Seven of their conditions relate specifically to feedback, these are as follows:

1. sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail
2. the feedback focuses on students' performance, on their learning and on actions under the students' control, rather than on the students themselves and on their characteristics
3. the feedback is timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance

4. feedback is appropriate to the purpose of the assignment and to its criteria for success
5. feedback is appropriate, in relation to students' understanding of what they are supposed to be doing
6. feedback is received and attended to
7. feedback is acted upon by the student.

Here, for example, the concept of 'high quality information' is further elaborated: students want specific, detailed, frequent and timely feedback, in other words feedback that is relevant to them at a particular moment in time. However, there is a possible contradiction: feedback that is relevant for a specific activity or piece of work may not meet the long term aims of developing independent learning skills; the highest value feedback (Hounsell, 2007) is that which will endure and benefit the learner's long-term development, and "general feedback has the greater power to stimulate learning" (Knight and Yorke, 2003, p.33). Moreover, the conditions raise as many questions as they answer: what, for example, is judged as 'sufficient' feedback, or who determines that this has been given 'often enough and in enough detail'? It appears, therefore, that both these frameworks of good feedback practice themselves provide scope for differing staff and student perceptions of feedback quality.

It is important to state at this point that the success of any interventions that appear to foster common perceptions about the quality of feedback have been treated with caution, considering the range of activities that are given the name feedback and the infinite contextual differences in teaching and learning environments. In particular, it has become apparent that students can become conditioned to ways of receiving feedback and time is required for students to consider new procedures for shared understanding as both normal and natural (Sadler, 1989). This requirement for ecological validity reinforces the need for care when interpreting experimental studies, including our own. Indeed, a review of the literature reveals that there are increasing opportunities for small-scale research into feedback practice, but a lack of longitudinal studies that would allow findings to be generalised across the higher education sector. Yet, increasingly, the implications of existing research appear profound.

Sadler, himself, came to realise that the need for opportunities to enable students to develop shared understandings of feedback and acquire evaluative expertise, "especially during the process of production" (1989, p.143) required nothing less than a "substantial modification to the learning environment", which in turn "involves turning the learning culture around" (Sadler, 1998, p.77). This raises the question whether what is required is not so much a framework of principles or conditions of learning to guide single interventions, as a more systematic and integrated approach to improving feedback quality. This question is explored in greater detail at the end of our review when we draw attention to more recent conceptual models of feedback practice.

So far this review of literature has discussed issues of feedback within a formative assessment context; that is, assessment that provides information and the opportunity to improve learning. Such assessment may have a purely developmental purpose, and consequently does not contribute to student grade for a course. However, it is commonly the situation that coursework assignments have both a summative (contributing to grade) and formative purpose, since feedback is usually provided by the tutor. The fact that assessment is frequently "doing double duty" (Boud, 2000, p.159) has proved problematic (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004, p.11), with the literature revealing an apparent mismatch in tutors' and students' perceptions of the relative value of grades and comments. Ever since Wotjas (1998) reported that some students read the grade and throw away the feedback, there has been an awareness, informed by research rather than anecdote, that students can value feedback in the form of a summative grade rather than formative comments. In an exploration of quality feedback this issue cannot be ignored.

As comparative research has shown that feedback comments rather than marks have the greatest impact upon learning (Butler, 1988; Black and William, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2003), findings that students read feedback much more carefully in the absence of marks has seemed to offer a way forward for good practice; particularly in view of recent concerns as to the emotional impact of grades upon self-belief and motivation (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Falchikov and Boud, 2007), continuing concerns about the dependability of assessment results (Murphy, 2004) and the so-called “toxic effect” of ‘warranting’ on higher education (Knight, 2007).

While the approach of providing comments without grades may seem appealing, it can be problematic, especially if the work is a summative component. For example, in one university in this study, policy dictates that students have the right to receive grades within a specific time period. Indeed, the higher education system itself continues to accord grades a privileged position in relation to admission to university and graduation from it. Thus it seems unlikely that gradeless feedback will be gain ground in this context.

Further reinforcement of the place of grades can be seen since students are increasingly experiencing a learning culture in schools in which feedback comments are linked to explicit assessment criteria, grade descriptors and targets, and which can play a significant part in their motivation to read feedback and improve (Ecclestone, 2007). In such circumstances, should we be so surprised that students are interested in grades?

Interestingly, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) elaborate upon their explicit request that feedback focus upon actions within the students’ control with the observation: “grades without feedback may be the more damaging” (p.18), thereby avoiding the dichotomy of either/or, but allowing instead for the provision of both comments and grades as a condition that supports learning. In an effort to contribute to this current debate, therefore, when asked to define their concepts of feedback quality, both tutors and students were offered the choice of either grades or feedback comments to see whether their perceptions would be similarly inclusive.

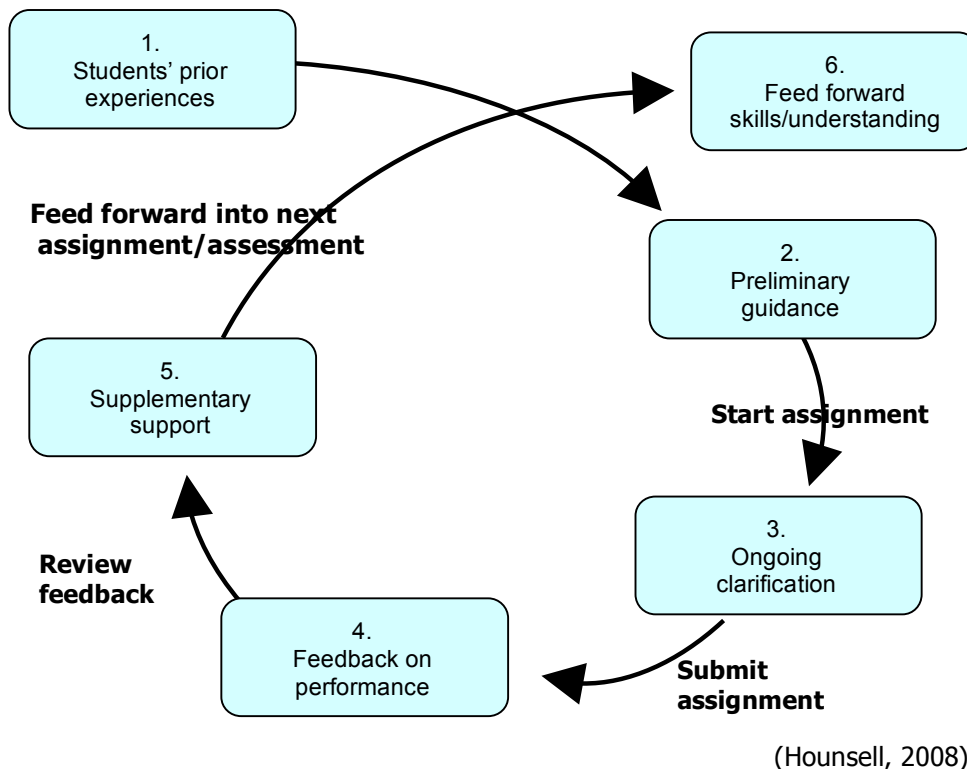
Having now analysed theoretical models, principles and conditions that promote quality feedback in relation to our own research foci, we want finally briefly to consider whether the frameworks of good practice proposed are possible within the current context of higher education.

Over a decade ago, Race judged that neither the “quality nor the diversity” of assessment was right and proposed that the challenges caused by greater number of students provided the opportunity to make “a radical review of the way we assess our students” (1995, [online]). Analysing the impact of widening participation, Yorke identified formative assessment, with its social dimension, as the key to academic integration and retention (2001, p.121), at the same time as Rust identified that formative assessment was likely to be “a major casualty” of continuing expansion (2001, p.4). Today, despite compelling evidence as to its efficacy in developing student learning (Black and William, 1998; Black *et al.*, 2003), it is claimed that formative assessment has been marginalised from the dominant discourse of assessment in higher education, which continues to privilege conventional, summative feedback in the form of measurement and certification (Boud, 2007, p.17). In short, the “radical reconstruction of curricula” to enable “more (and better) formative assessment rather than less”, which Yorke (2003, p.497) identified as necessary if the student experience was to be enhanced, has simply not happened.

Yet innovations in assessment have taken place, the principles of good feedback practice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2004) and suggestions for conditions that support assessment for learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004) are rigorously evidence based, and many higher education practices can be identified that have encouraged quality feedback in practice (Boud and Falchikov, 2007). Increasingly, however, a growing awareness can be detected in the literature of the fragmented nature of much of this research, and attempts are beginning to be made constructively to align (Biggs, 2003) proposed innovations to bring about “the greater degree of consistency” in assessment practice that “is needed to have a major

impact” (Boud and Falchikov, 2007, p.185). What is now beginning to be proposed is not so much a set of principles or a number of conditions, but an integrated *system* of feedback practice with an explicit cycle of formative activities that can scaffold students’ learning.

Figure 1: Guidance and feedback cycle



The first of these models, shown above, positions feedback on assignments within a cycle of guidance (Hounsell *et al.*, 2006); while Boud and Falchikov (2007) propose a holistic scheme of assessment in which assignment tasks are organised progressively to develop students’ evaluative expertise, their “informing judgement” (p.187), across course programmes. Both of these innovations are presented as possible ways to reframe assessment to enhance the student experience at university and, therefore, appear to offer potential solutions to counter widespread concern as to the quality of feedback in higher education. Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue on the basis of their experience as academics, that there are clear signs that students recognise the need for such integrated processes at university. Our literature review, however, highlights the possible relevance of these proposed innovations to students’ *prior* experience of assessment at school or sixth form college.

Hounsell *et al.* (2008) propose that university feedback be positioned within a guidance loop, but the assessment literature relating to schools reveals that students might already have experienced such a process of formative guidance prior to their transition to higher education; their dissatisfaction with feedback, therefore, could potentially be rooted in the expectation that such a feedback/guidance loop is already in place. Our research, therefore, set out to investigate this possibility and our report concludes with recommendations based upon our findings for the future development of such integrated systems of feedback within higher education.

Our review of current literature shows that the importance of feedback is not contested; feedback is seen as critical by students and tutors alike as a means of improving performance and promoting long-term learning. However, the Hounsell *et al.* (2008) model confirms that a significant paradigm shift continues to develop, with the conceptualisation of

feedback practice moving from one of expert transmission towards one of engagement in a process of formative assessment. However, our analysis of relevant research on feedback has demonstrated an apparent gap between this developing theory and current practice, which remains characterised by summative assessment.

A comparative reading of the assessment literature relating to school and sixth form settings, which assumes a culture in which formative feedback practice is the norm, makes this gap seem even wider. Yet higher education studies, while acknowledging from a constructivist perspective the importance of prior experience, all but ignore the potential impact of students' experience of assessment in further education. The first question raised by our cross-sector review of the literature was, therefore, what is students' experience of feedback practice prior to university and how does this influence their expectations of higher education?

Yorke and Longden (2004) have raised the possibility that what higher education then expects of students "may be rather different from what may have been expected in other forms of education" (p.113), and increasingly the evidence from the 14 to 19 sector seems to suggest that the habit of independent learning can no longer be taken for granted (Wilde *et al.*, 2006). If so, this mismatch of expectations could have profound implications and help explain why closing the gap (Sadler, 1989; Black and Wiliam, 1998) between existing and desired performance at university remains so problematic. For Yorke (2006), the successful management of students' transition to higher education is vital in improving the quality of the student learning experience; therefore, the second point of enquiry raised by the review was: did such a mismatch of expectations regarding student autonomy exist? If so, it is not difficult to understand why National Student Surveys continually present such a bleak picture: feedback may be the fault line between two educational systems which are no longer as closely aligned as they once were.

Despite this possibility of potential misalignment between educational sectors, higher education pedagogy continues to expect students upon entry to be capable of independent learning, and there is a noticeable lack of attention as to how this might be scaffolded thereafter. For example, while peer and self-assessment are recommended as good practice, available theoretical models give insufficient attention to how feedback activities can be effectively differentiated and structured progressively to develop students' evaluative skills. In this respect, the Boud and Falchikov (2007) scheme goes some way to address the limitations of the Hounsell *et al.* model (2008, 2005, 2006). Usefully, tracking students through their first year of university gave us the opportunity to examine not only if student perceptions changed during this crucial period of transition, but also if students experienced any structured induction into what for many is an entirely new community of practice.

Our review identifies a change in the conceptualisation of feedback in the research literature, and both the Hounsell *et al.* model (2008, 2005, 2006) and the Boud and Falchikov (2007) scheme presuppose that this paradigm shift towards formative practice is reflected in the perceptions of tutors – but is it? Likewise, the existence of a seminal literature on assessment for learning in school settings, should not lead to the unquestioned assumption that students themselves perceive quality feedback as formative assessment. These reflections upon current theories made exploring staff and student perceptions of quality feedback essential.

Our review of the literature, therefore, cautioned us against undertaking research into quality feedback that did not take into account the challenge posed by preconceptions of both tutors and students. Tutors may declare a commitment to independent learning on one hand, while engaging in feedback practices that safeguard tacit knowledge and inhibit the progressive development of student autonomy on the other (Haggis, 2006; Higgins, 2000; Lea and Stierer, 2000). At the same time, the expectations of feedback guidance from students "not ready for the demands that higher education is making – or should be making – of them" (Murry and Kirton, 2006, p.7) might need to be managed more effectively; for example, through the development of peer and self-assessment skills. There is ongoing debate in the

current literature between an awareness of the need to provide guidance and established expectations of independent learning, and these competing perceptions were explored through our action research to improve the quality of feedback.

Thus, a final point of enquiry directed by our review of the literature concerned the process of change. Change is clearly needed, as Rust (2007, p.231) states bluntly: “The literature suggests we are bad at assessment generally, the evidence is that it is in the area of feedback that we are possibly worst of all.” Our review, however, helped us to identify an exemplar of how such change might be developed, and in line with our cross-sector perspective we decided to see if Black *et al.*'s (2003) approach to supporting improvements in feedback practice in schools could work in the context of higher education. We saw this as a means of engaging more fully with the overall aim of our research, to enhance the learning experience of students during the year of our project.

2. Aims

The main aims of the project were to:

1. investigate the impact of *prior* experiences of assessment on students' expectations of feedback practices in higher education
2. explore tutors' and students' perceptions of what is considered quality feedback and how this may vary within and across disciplines
3. analyse any changes in students' perceptions of quality feedback throughout their first-year higher education experience
4. identify barriers to providing quality feedback.

The subsidiary aims were to:

5. enable interventions to promote quality feedback and reflectively evaluate these strategies, developed in response to dialogue between subject tutors and students about feedback practice
6. improve the quality of the student learning experience by developing and reflectively evaluating a process of change to embed good practice.

Achieving the first four aims would enable us to develop a deeper understanding of the issues behind survey results such as the National Student Surveys, and propose approaches to enable the development of sustainable high quality assessment feedback.

Additionally, in aims five and six we wanted to explore how well the dialogic model would work as a means of improvement. Given the timescale of the project, we were able to perform a preliminary analysis of the process in a small sample of three disciplines at one university. A reflective account is appropriate given the timescale.

3. Methods

3.1 Design and scope

The project was composed of three strands. The first strand explored student perceptions of their experience of feedback (and university expectations) in sixth forms at schools and FE colleges. Three schools and three FE/sixth form colleges were selected through consultation with the partnerships office and widening participation unit at University **N** in areas of the north-west of England with relatively low HE representation.

The second strand investigated students' and tutors' perceptions of feedback quality during the first-year university experience in three popular subject areas. The subject areas researched were Psychology, Education Studies and Performing Arts. These were chosen because they recruited relatively large cohorts ranging in size from around 100 to over 200

students. Performing Arts was selected as a contrast to the other two social science subjects, since it included a higher emphasis on verbal activities and performances.

The third strand consisted of negotiation with course teams to design and implement an intervention to improve feedback quality after considering the views of students and tutors. This strand was an attempt to engage students and course teams in dialogue to develop shared understanding of the assessment and feedback processes and respond to each other's concerns. The rationale for this approach is based on the intervention strategy adopted by Black *et al.* (2003), in which teachers designed their own interventions based on research evidence. The approach also took into account research that identifies a mismatch in staff and student perceptions about assessment (Norton, 1990; Harrington, 2006a) and, in particular, about feedback (Norton and Norton, 2001; Norton *et al.*, 2002). Such research findings support the view that if students and staff are to have shared, meaningful understanding of quality standards and criteria, then "there should be opportunities for engagement in dialogue" (Hyatt, 2005, p.351).

In order to develop a detailed understanding of the perceptions generated by assessment, qualitative methods were primarily used to provide rich data grounded in the often complex experience of feedback. We were influenced in this decision by the fact that previous research studies into feedback practice report that it is this kind of evidence that can usefully inform change and development within educational practice (Black *et al.*, 2003). This approach also addressed the issue that "the majority of the studies concerning students' perceptions about assessment are quantitative in nature" (Struyven, 2005, p.12).

We found the use of semi-structured focus groups particularly valuable when exploring concepts. For example, when faced with the question, 'what do you consider good quality feedback on your assignments?' participants often responded quickly with one to three of the more obvious characteristics (such as timeliness). However, it became clear in the ensuing dialogue that students had much more sophisticated conceptions of feedback, which are difficult to elicit in questionnaires, but gradually emerged over an extended discussion period.

3.2 The questionnaire

Questionnaires were also used as part of the research for the second strand, but as a secondary instrument to check for bias in findings from the focus groups, (which were self-selecting). The questionnaires therefore mirrored the purpose of the focus groups, and were composed largely of a series of Likert scale questions to capture perceptions of students' experiences of feedback prior to university, and also their expectations of university (what *should* be). We also included open questions regarding the characteristics and relative importance of 'quality feedback'. Questionnaires were distributed early in the academic year to students in the three subject areas at University **N**, and also in Psychology at University **L**. The questionnaire is included in Appendix 1. The questionnaire was tested for clarity and by distributing to an opportunity sample of 20 second-year students at University **N** and discussing the questions with the students. The wording of some questions was consequently amended.

3.3 Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under the guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) in an attempt to respect the individuals involved, and the knowledge they provided. The main ethical dilemma resulting from this research design relates to the development of interventions promoting the use of quality feedback. The issue is that in sharing with lecturers, material gleaned from focus groups with students, it may be argued that the study breaks the participants right to privacy and confidentiality. To contextualise this issue, all participants' were asked to sign a consent form detailing, among other things, their role in the study and how their data would be used. Further to this, before each focus group, students were informed that the information that they gave would be used in collaboration with their lecturers to help develop new approaches to providing feedback.

In order to protect the identity of particular individuals, all transcripts were anonymised and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act. No focus group material was provided directly to lecturers in raw form; instead, after the data had been carefully analysed a researcher presented a representative summary with which lecturers could gauge the attitudes of their students in an unbiased way. Any attempt to discriminate against individual students on the basis of this information was averted as the data provided was a representative cross-section of the whole cohort. It was of vital importance to this research that new feedback practices were embedded within the subject areas, and to this purpose it was necessary for some information to be shared with staff. It was also of the utmost importance that the staff themselves developed the intervention on this basis to promote ownership of any new practices associated with the research. The authors deemed this method to be ethically sound on the basis that the knowledge gained from the study greatly outweighed the risk of any discriminatory behaviour by lecturers against their student. Also the interventions were intended to promote the development of high quality feedback, something that was of direct benefit to the students involved and to future cohorts.

Throughout the process the utmost care was taken in representing students' voices to lecturers. Opinions that may have been deemed derogatory by staff were reframed as regards the constructive elements that they contained, and staff were reminded that the focus of the research was in providing them with new opportunities to impact positively on the learning of their students, something that was beneficial to them rather than detrimental. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage and have any of the data or materials relating to their involvement destroyed. In this way, participants were protected from unnecessary stress and risk to their academic or professional progress.

3.4 Data collection

To address the first strand of the research, a focus group (five to nine students) was held with students in the upper sixth form of each school/college, and a separate focus group or interview was conducted with their teachers. The students in these groups were selected according to their subject study choices at A-level or university subject aspirations to match as closely as possible with the three subject areas used in the first-year university study. These focus groups occurred in the period November 2006 through to May 2007, according to availability. The sessions were recorded and transcribed. One researcher conducted all interviews/focus groups in the Strand 1 study.

Table 1: Participation in school/college study (Strand 1)

	School S1	School S2	School S3	College C1	College C2	College C3	Totals
No. of students	5	9	7	9	-	7	37
No. of teachers	3	-	1	3	4	2	13

To address the second strand, three focus groups were held with six to eight first-year undergraduate students in each of the three subject areas identified above at University **N** during the period from October 2006 to May 2007. These focus groups explored students' perceptions of feedback quality and their experiences of feedback throughout their first year. Each focus group was recruited separately (i.e. the same students were not used in all three groups). Since the groups formed an opportunity sample, a parallel questionnaire was also distributed to all first-year students in those subjects at the start of the year as a means of validation and to identify any bias that may have arisen in the first focus groups.

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with at least two module tutors from each subject area. (It was not possible to arrange times when they were all available to meet as a group.) The first interview, in October 2006, explored the tutors' perceptions of quality

feedback. The second, in December 2006/January 2007 provided feedback from student perceptions and an opportunity to discuss and develop an intervention to improve feedback quality (Strand 3). The third interview, in May 2007, provided an opportunity to discuss the impact of the intervention.

In order to provide further validation of the research in the second strand, parallel focus groups were planned to be conducted with first-year Psychology students at Universities *L* and *M*, and a questionnaire was also administered at the start of the course to collect further data about student perceptions of quality feedback and their experiences at school/college prior to university. Unfortunately, it was not possible to run the final focus group at University *M*.

Focus groups generally lasted around one hour, and interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

Table 2: Participation in first-year university study (Strand 2, University *N*)

	Psychology	Performing Arts	Education Studies	Totals
Total no. of focus group students	24	17	24	65
No. of student questionnaires	12	35	68	115
No. of tutors (interviews)	4	3	3	10

Table 3: Participation in first-year university study (Strand 2, Universities *L* and *M*)

	Psychology (University <i>L</i>)	Psychology (University <i>M</i>)	Totals
No. of focus group students	29	14	43
No. of student questionnaires	61	0	61

The third strand of research was conducted with the three subject areas identified above at University *N*. The intervention process began with workshops, where the course teams discussed the student perceptions from the first focus group and the findings from the first staff interviews. The course team then discussed and designed an intervention to promote quality feedback. This was developed and implemented in the second semester and initial perceptions of impact were collected from students and tutors at the end of the year (May 2007).

Two researchers were involved in conducting the Strand 2/3 interviews and focus groups at University *N*. The principal researcher conducted the first and second focus groups/interviews, and facilitated the course team workshops for the interventions. A second project team researcher, who was not involved with the intervention workshops, conducted the final interviews/focus groups as the project team felt this might facilitate more frank evaluation of the intervention process. A final set of individual interviews were conducted with the three leaders of the course teams in September 2007 to collect perceptions of the effectiveness of the intervention process.

3.5 Data analysis

Interview and focus group data were transcribed by an external agency. Three researchers were involved in performing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Two of the researchers had conducted the focus groups/interviews at University *N* and had been

immersed in the data for several months. We independently read the transcripts and also listened to the recordings, identifying prominent themes. We discussed our initial interpretations at length, refining our thematic structure in the process until we reached agreement. At each point we checked that evidence to support any conclusion was corroborated by several sources, and we examined the data for any counter-examples.

The principle of member validation has been used throughout the project where possible: during interviews and focus groups the researchers checked possible interpretations with the participants. By using three focus group/interview cycles we were able to further test interpretations at subsequent meetings.

Descriptive statistics were generated from the 176 questionnaire responses and used as a means of validating the major findings of the focus groups. Percentage responses were aggregated for each of the subject groups and also for the cohort as a whole to aid comparison with the focus group data.

3.6 Methodological reflection

In this section we provide a very brief reflection, identifying methodological strengths and issues with our approach.

A particular strength of our approach was the sample size used, almost 150 students were involved in focus groups, and more than 20 teachers/tutors participated in interviews. This provided a rich dataset. The size of the sample and the iterative thematic analysis carried out by three researchers provides us with a good deal of confidence in the validity of these results. The dialogic approach of the research also foregrounded the tutors', teachers' and students' voice adding to the explanatory power of the study.

The most significant challenge we faced concerned the scale of the study. We were collecting data in parallel from six schools/colleges and three universities; we were also planning interventions in the three universities as a result of the initial research. A further complication occurred since one university had semester-long courses, while the other two had year-long courses. We had not anticipated the results obtained from the school/college study, and given more time would have conducted this study first: the results inform the questionnaire and the design of the university research phase. We acknowledge that the questionnaire is underdeveloped; however, it was always considered as a secondary instrument to give indications of confidence levels in our focus group findings.

A second time-related issue concerned our plan to include both research and intervention as a *result of the research*, within one academic year. In retrospect, we were encouraged by the willingness that the course teams showed to pilot an intervention in large first-year cohorts. However, the consequence of this constraint was that the interventions could not be evaluated, but it is rewarding that the course teams are developing the interventions further this year.

Finally, while we argue that our research findings are robust, the sample was limited to three subjects and three universities. Given the diversity of disciplines and HEIs in the UK, we must be cautious in generalising the results without further evidence.

While these points highlight some shortcomings in our methodology, they also afford significant opportunities for further research. The qualitative study and pilot questionnaire enables us to construct a robust questionnaire for widespread use. Furthermore, follow-up research on the interventions will yield insights into the scaffolding of independent learning skills in first-year students.

4. Analysis of results

The results presented in this section are derived from a thematic analysis of focus groups at six schools/FE colleges, which explored perceptions of their experience of feedback, together with data from focus groups conducted with Performing Arts, Education Studies and

Psychology first-year students at University **N** and Psychology students at University **L**. Quantitative data from the questionnaire distributed to the first-year university students at Universities **L** and **N** is also reported. Quotes used in this section have been selected as representative of the views expressed. In all cases, themes were checked for verbatim existence in the transcripts to ensure that they were prevalent, and we explicitly highlight where this is not the case. Teacher interviews were also used as a means of validating the students' statements.

4.1 Students' perceptions of what constitutes quality feedback

Almost universally in the focus groups, students (and staff, see Section 4.3) expressed two purposes of feedback: a judgement of the standard reached (*How well we've done*: S2P1) and instructions for learning improvement (*How you could do better*: S4P1).

Beyond these interpretations of summative judgement and improvement, students' descriptions of what constituted quality feedback were intertwined with descriptions of assessment tasks, tutors' behaviour and the general guidance environment that they experienced. Indeed the characteristics associated with 'quality feedback' reported in this study can only be fully understood in relation to the way students conceptualised feedback as a continual process involving ongoing, dialogue primarily with a teacher or other expert tutor.

The perception that:

... personal feedback and being there with the person makes such a difference ...
(US1FG3)

articulates a relationship between tutor and tutee that is repeated in nearly all of the students' dialogues about feedback: a relationship of guidance and support.

Unsurprisingly, student accounts of feedback were highly related to the tasks they encountered. All students were questioned as to whether or not they were provided with suitable criteria, and if and how they used the mark scheme in preparing assignments. School students seemed fairly familiar with this type of focus on assessment materials:

You're encouraged to use it a lot in class, like if you're doing coursework they'll give you a sheet or like assessment criteria and that, then they'll teach you in class how you can do this and help you in your coursework. (S4FG1)

This type of explicit teaching of assessment-related materials with a tutor available for questions and clarification is commonplace in the school students' descriptions; university students generally felt this focus was unavailable for them:

... we got the marking criteria the week before Easter and the essay had to be in a week before (group laughs) ... (US1FG3)

Differences also arose when talk turned to the practicalities of feedback. In school, where feedback is usually a tightly coupled system with considerable emphasis on preparation and continual support through the writing stage to the submission of an assignment, students felt well supported as in the situation described below:

I did some homework on maths over the half term we've just had and I handed it all in, I did about seven or eight sheets of work, got it all back the other day and it was just full of quick notes throughout the whole thing and I just said to my teacher, "don't really understand this" 'cos his handwriting wasn't very legible because obviously he was rushing through it, but he then, I stayed behind after one lesson for about an hour, just going through everything that I'd done wrong, so it was more verbal and he could explain stuff because I was there as well and I prefer it like that, because then both of us are putting the time in, I'm getting extra help back as well. (S6)

Through the marking of drafts, the provision of exemplar material, the consistent nature of verbal and written feedback and the use of target grades, students formed notions of what constituted 'quality feedback', which were framed by classroom interactions that detailed the minutiae of feedback provision:

They'll say how, like whether a part's good or whether a part's not good, break it down for you like they'll say if you need that sentence or whether you could have used different words and that. (UISnP)

This prior experience of feedback as part of an integrated guidance process drives expectations and is in sharp contrast to what students experience at university, where the greater emphasis on self-directed or independent learning leaves these former school students feeling unsupported in their new surroundings as expressed below:

My confidence has just gone down 'cos I quite enjoy writing I know it sounds really stupid but if you've got a point I really quite enjoy it. I feel like I've come here and you don't get any help and I feel like you don't have anyone to ask for help. Not necessarily that I need the help but I need to feel like I can ask for help. And there was a stage before the writing centre when I needed help and the only people I could ask for help were the other people in my class. (US3FG3)

If perceptions of quality feedback gained through experiences in school are carried through into the first year at university, the quote below outlines how one school student felt when discussing the prospect of lower frequency feedback at university:

It's a bit daunting in that it's a big jump anyway, I would assume from college to university and [inaudible] powered on thinking, at least they give you everything but you've obviously got it all yourself and if there's only two hours of lectures a week, I'm thinking I won't really know if I'm doing it wrong or if I've done an essay that's not right, so it's a bit scary. (S4FG1)

The difficulty in adapting to the new feedback environment can be challenging for some as they try to adjust to university life:

I don't think it's so much feedback, we need feedfront, we need to be set on the right path, but as you said not spoon-fed, but you know this is what should be in the introduction ... it's nice to have feedback but if someone just says you're on the right path, that suits me fine. (US3FG3)

The expectations that university staff will have time to spend individually with students (to help with problems), mark drafts and give comprehensive verbal and written feedback help accentuate the considerable differences in practice at university compared to schools. Universities demand different learning behaviours from their students:

In my instance I was able to ask the tutors enough questions, I didn't do it as well as I could have done and that's where the feedback came in, but I had enough idea of how to do analytical writing ... that's only because I had to seek out how to write it. (US2FG3)

Other difficulties can arise for students at university as a result of this change of emphasis:

It's not relevant, it's not in time, it's not of any use to you, you couldn't really use it constructively to improve your work in any way shape or form ... it's possibly one of the worst systems of feedback I've ever seen. (US1FG3)

A perceived loss of support is felt most in the relationship between tutor and tutee:

You've got to be more disciplined here, you've got to fit in when they're available as well. I think one thing that is missing though is the support from the personal tutor ... I think that's where there's a failing in the system. (US2FG3)

The notable absence of a frequent support system, such as that experienced in FE, often leaves students feeling uncertain about what to do, and sometimes completely lost. The emotional entailments are clear in the following quotes:

... it's like you're left dangling and then they drop something on you and you're like, I need to do this, I need to do that. (US1FG2P17)

... we were only told after about four weeks what actually a portfolio is, to tell you the truth. I mean we haven't even been explained what the portfolio has to have in so we're all just going to give up. It's going to end up like, god, let's walk away. (US1FG2P14)

From the student perspective, our analysis shows that quality feedback is perceived as a system of guidance that provides feelings of support, frequent opportunities for discussion, gives a summative judgement of performance, identifies areas of improvement and scaffolds the student to help achieve higher grades.

4.2 Strand 1: School/FE students' perceptions of their pre-university experiences

In this section, we provide a more detailed analysis of the school and FE students' perceptions of the guidance system outlined in the previous section. This process starts with *preparatory guidance* for an assessed task and progresses through the *in-task guidance* phase to post-submission *performance feedback*. A model that describes the process is shown in Figure 2, which we call the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (DFC), and discussed at the end of the section. This model mirrors many aspects of the process that Hounsell *et al.* (2008) propose for higher education, as shown in Figure 1.

In the initial *preparatory guidance* phase of the cycle, common activities were: the use of explicit marking schemes and criteria, personalised target grades and opportunity for discussion in class. In four out of the six schools/colleges we surveyed, students indicated that information from their previous performance was used to set targets for each individual. One student described it as follows (referring to assignment work, not homework):

It's taken from your GCSEs and it's what you're expected, like the lowest you're expected to get, so like if you do a piece of work and it's below, you often have to do it again until it's either above the target grade or on your target grade. (S6P3)

School students are, therefore, experiencing a personalised system, and are set targets based on their prior achievements. The targets were subsequently used as a reference point for future feedback:

In Psychology, if we do an essay, they give us a feedback sheet with like your target grade, what grade you've got and how you can improve on what you've done, what your strengths are. (S6P2)

We consider that this is consistent with the philosophy of setting achievable goals within a student's "zone of proximal development" [ZPD] (Vygotsky, 1987, p.84).

Thus, the importance of grades was emphasised at the very start of the assessment process. Assessment criteria are inextricably related to grades, and students in all schools and colleges surveyed displayed a strong awareness of the criteria or marking schemes, although there was a considerable variation in the way the criteria were used by teachers and students, as demonstrated by these extracts:

... when I did my A-levels we knew exactly what they wanted from us. (US3FG1)

For History we do, in Psychology she goes through the essays and she shows us how she has to mark them, tell you what to include to get certain grades ... (S3P5-6)

You're encouraged to use it a lot in class, like if you're doing coursework they'll give you a sheet or like assessment criteria and that, then they'll teach you in class how you can do this and help you in your coursework, (S6P9)

The last comment demonstrates two points: firstly the continuous and systematic reinforcement of the use of criteria as students move into the in-task guidance phase of the cycle, and secondly it shows efforts to promote self-assessment, though very few students reported much awareness or practice of self-assessment. The prominence of assessment criteria was corroborated by teachers, who also emphasised the process of consistently and systematically using the criteria laid down by the examination boards:

... they are getting marked according to the exam scheme all the way through and eventually it sinks in ... we absolutely hammer, the main thing ... (U1STnP)

Two approaches, identified by students and teachers, which promoted engagement with the criteria were peer marking and marking of exemplar material. Students in all focus groups reported having experience of peer marking, although it met with a mixed reaction. From those that we questioned, some were positive, regarding it as constructive and motivational:

It's good because like it just gives you somebody else's perspective on your work that you might not be able to see ... it makes you try harder because if you know that's going to happen, you don't want to look stupid in front of everyone else. (S6P11)

... in RE ... your name's on the top, I don't know, you feel a bit like persuaded to do better as well because you're under pressure. (S2P7)

We used to like write a paragraph and have to pass it round and write comments on each other's work and how we could improve ... then we used to talk about it; I found it really helpful to be honest. (US1FG1P7)

I think 'cos we all knew each other, we got quite comfortable with it. (US1FG1P7)

However, others reported that they were less comfortable and had negative experiences relating to trust and competency, understanding and applying the criteria, and plagiarism:

I found that quite difficult to be honest with you, I didn't like that at all ... lack of trust in other people I suppose. (S1P10)

I'd rather have a teacher marking my work than a student. (S1P12)

I'd feel like my essay hasn't been marked properly. (S2P7)

I've had my work copied twice. (S6P11)

[Referring to use of exemplars for students to mark] *You have to guess what you think this is worth. (S6P16)*

A further significant aspect of the in-task guidance phase, identified by both teachers and students, was the use of exemplar material as a means of modelling what was required:

... they do it more when you are planning an essay ... examples of what you have to put in ... but you have to do it though. (UISnP)

... we also get examples back from the best one and she prints them off for us ... so the next time you do a similar essay, then you can use it and she'll give us structures as well for like the best. (S4P9)

Teachers and students cited a high level of discussion and interaction at the in-task guidance phase: the assignments given to students were often broken down into smaller tasks, and students in all focus groups related that they could submit (often multiple) drafts to the teacher and receive rapid feedback; almost all students reported receiving written and verbal feedback within one week of submission. The feedback was often reported to be specific and detailed, and face-to-face support was offered both formally (in lessons and timetabled support classes) and informally (for example, at lunch breaks). Students in all the schools/colleges acknowledged the ease of access to and frequency of teacher support:

... we got like a five-minute meeting with him after the drafts, you'd do your draft, you'd hand it in like a week later, he'd go through everyone's with them personally to

say what you can do, it's better than having it written down because you don't always understand what he's written. (S4P17)

... I done an Access Course before coming to university and we used to have tutorials, one-to-one meetings, and I loved it, you know because they specifically, they give like five, ten minutes a week or something like this, and they tell you what's good about your work, what's bad about your work, where you've got to improve ... I really enjoyed it. (US4FG3P6)

The need for meaningful, specific and detailed comments and opportunities for discussion are shown by two students who were quick to cite poor feedback examples:

... "you haven't done enough with this essay" and we don't get told where we've gone wrong, so we don't know how to improve. (S3P3)

We used to get like question marks next to things and you'd go "what does that mean?" (US3FG1P10)

At this stage, the role of drafts was identified by both teachers and students as particularly important, and some schools and departments had rules about the number of drafts a student could submit, although students suggested that these were not rigorously applied:

... they had the option of five drafts on it that they ticked and then the final. (S6P18)

It's normally only two but it depends. (S1P7)

... we could hand coursework in as many times as we wanted. (S2P5)

Only one student provided a counter-example, reminiscent of university practice:

... it was all just handed in and that was it. You'd get feedback ... you'd normally get a sheet and it was kind of like tick boxes. (US1FG1P8)

However, drafting can be misused as well as helping learning; both students and teachers identified that there could be gaming behaviour in the use of drafts:

If you do it too many times, it ends up with the teacher kinda writing it for you ... It's very easy to do that, just something to keep them quiet and then they'll tell you what to do, so you're then not doing as much work. (S1P7)

There is a fine balance to be struck between constructive guidance that helps the student improve their own work and teacher feedback that directly improves a student's coursework. The problem has been recognised by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ):

... there's a thing come through from the JCQ saying about feedback ... what was a grey area, they've said quite categorically that a teacher feedback to directly improve that coursework is malpractice. (S4StaffP9)

When school/FE college students and teachers were told that it was not common practice for students to submit drafts at university, they considered that it would be problematic:

... we've learned to rely on drafts and rely on feedback, so if you're not getting that at university, it's going to be a big shock. (S6P19)

Yes, that would be utterly unknown to them, to hand a piece of work in and that's it and you're finished, absolutely unknown. (S1P9)

This indeed turned out to be consistent with the concerns expressed by the first-year students, which we examine later in this report.

The students interviewed also expressed a strong desire to receive grades/marks together with feedback comments. Both teachers and students perceived that the school system is focused on improving grades, and students have developed perceptions about the significance associated with the grade. The use of target grades, as discussed earlier,

reinforces their importance in the process, and the following extract demonstrates their value in a sixth form college:

- I* Why do you need grades?
M Reassurance isn't it, know how you're going.
F Everything's really based around grades.
F You can compare it to your target grade then. (S6P3)¹

The theme of reassurance and motivation permeated the study in responses of students and tutors, demonstrating the power and impact on self-esteem that assessment and feedback can have.

The final stage in the process is feedforward – target setting and acting on feedback – and here the picture is more mixed. Indeed, there were only two occasions when students mentioned action planning as a result of post-assessment feedback. However, it was evident from the interviews that feedback on drafts was often attended to by students and seen as critical. The importance of feedback for improving was generally acknowledged; typical comments were:

... do something different to improve their work or learn as a result of the feedback given, that's quite important, otherwise feedback is pointless. (US3FG1P21)

They're experts you should take it on board – they know what they're talking about. (S4P2)

However, there was a divergence of perceptions at this point: teachers were not entirely in agreement with students' expressed conscientious attention to comments:

I think that's variable, many of the students do take notice of the feedback but you do tend to be repeating yourself over and over again with the same students. (UIFEStaffnP)

One difficulty is the differing perception by students and tutors as to what is of value. Students appear to take a selective and strategic approach to using feedback comments, depending on their view of the relevance of the feedback *at that point in time*. If students do not believe the suggestions are applicable in the foreseeable future, they are put aside:

It depends on whether it's about the structure of your essay, about your vocabulary, like technical terms, or whether it's about the content. (US3FG1P10)

... if it's just like one that you do the homework, you usually just look at it and then put it to one side and then that's it, done, because you don't often do an essay on the same subject. (UISnP)

... [no] because they're totally different questions as well most of the time. (S3)

No, 'cos the feedback that I got wasn't to do with the actual work; it was like punctuation and stuff. (US1P9)

... if it's something that you don't regularly do like put quotes in English or something, then you can use that for the next essay you're doing. (S6P7)

I write down what I've gone wrong and make sure I look at it. (S4P2)

Yes, definitely, in my review I was told that I should make things much more, change it round and I was also told [inaudible] so it's going to be very handy. (US3FG1P17)

Thus, while we acknowledge that there are students who are 'cue deaf', the reality of the issue surrounding attending to feedback is more complex, and requires that students

¹ I: Interviewer; M: Male respondent; F: Female respondent.

perceive that the feedback is meaningful and relevant at that point in time. If it is not meaningful students cannot act on it, whatever their intentions.

Quantitative data

The quantitative data collected by questionnaire (n=176) support the qualitative information as shown in Table 4. Participants were drawn from two of the three institutions, **L** (n=61, all Psychology students) and **N** (total n=115, 12 Psychology students, 68 Education Studies students and 35 Performing Arts students). Institutional and subject restrictions meant that questionnaire data could not be collected from University **M**, and the number of Psychology students at University **N** was limited to 12, therefore care must be exercised in interpreting this dataset because Performing Arts students (n=35) are significantly underrepresented compared to Education Studies (n=68) and Psychology students (n=73). Students were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to (i) gauge how students interact with feedback (for example, how feedback was acquired and acted on, how well was it understood), (ii) gauge their experiences of feedback in the first year of university, and (iii) compare present experiences with past experiences of feedback in schools and FE colleges. Meaningful trends in the data are discussed below.

When aggregating the strongly agree/agree responses, almost 90% (mean 1.87, SD 0.79) of respondents claimed to pay close attention to feedback, and around 80% (mean 1.93, SD 0.74) claimed to act on it and found it helped their learning. Students also actively tried to resolve misunderstandings (74%). The weakest response related to the level of detail of feedback, though as we have pointed out, this is a problematic area: students may desire feedback that gives them the answer, or they may not understand it. Given that feedback is aimed at helping students move from current performance to higher performance levels, it is positioned at the boundary between the two, and there is inevitably going to be a difference between current practices and what students desire.

Table 4: Questionnaire responses

Positive response questions	Agree/Strongly Agree %	Likert 1-5 Mean (Standard Deviation)
I usually paid close attention to feedback.	89	1.87 (0.79)
When I received feedback, I used it in preparing my next assignment.	80	2.05 (0.86)
I found that taking notice of feedback improved my learning.	85	1.93 (0.74)
If I didn't understand feedback, I tried to get help from my teacher.	74	2.18 (0.99)
In my experience, I often received feedback from teachers on drafts.	65	2.35 (1.06)
Feedback was provided quickly enough to be useful.	73	2.29 (0.96)
Feedback was often clearly related to the assessment criteria.	80	2.02 (0.78)
In my experience, feedback was frequently encouraging.	75	2.08 (0.88)
I often received feedback in enough detail.	62	2.51 (0.98)
I understood the assessment criteria for my assignments.	71	2.31 (0.88)
Negative response questions	Disagree/Strongly Disagree %	
The feedback I was given did not help me reach my desired level of performance.	19	3.56 (0.98)
The feedback I was given for one assignment was largely irrelevant to subsequent assignments.	19	3.39 (1.06)
It was often not clear from feedback what counted as good performance.	37	3.07 (1.14)

The questionnaire responses were found to be consonant with the major qualitative findings; no single item of the questionnaire was found to strenuously contradict the attitudes offered by participants in the focus groups. In general, students were highly satisfied with their experience of feedback in their former school/college; very different attitudes emerged in the university context as shown below. The questionnaire data support the idea that, for the students participating in this study, expectations of quality feedback at university are strongly influenced by experiences at their prior educational institution. When questioned about their previous institution 80% agreed that feedback was clearly related to the assessment criteria, 75% that feedback was frequently encouraging, 62% that feedback was provided in enough detail and 65% that they were able to receive feedback on drafts. Coupled with features of the qualitative analysis, it is clear that the majority of students felt supported in their previous learning environment through the various systems of feedback in place. This seems to have produced an expectation among students that the same level of feedback they experienced at school/FE college should continue at university.

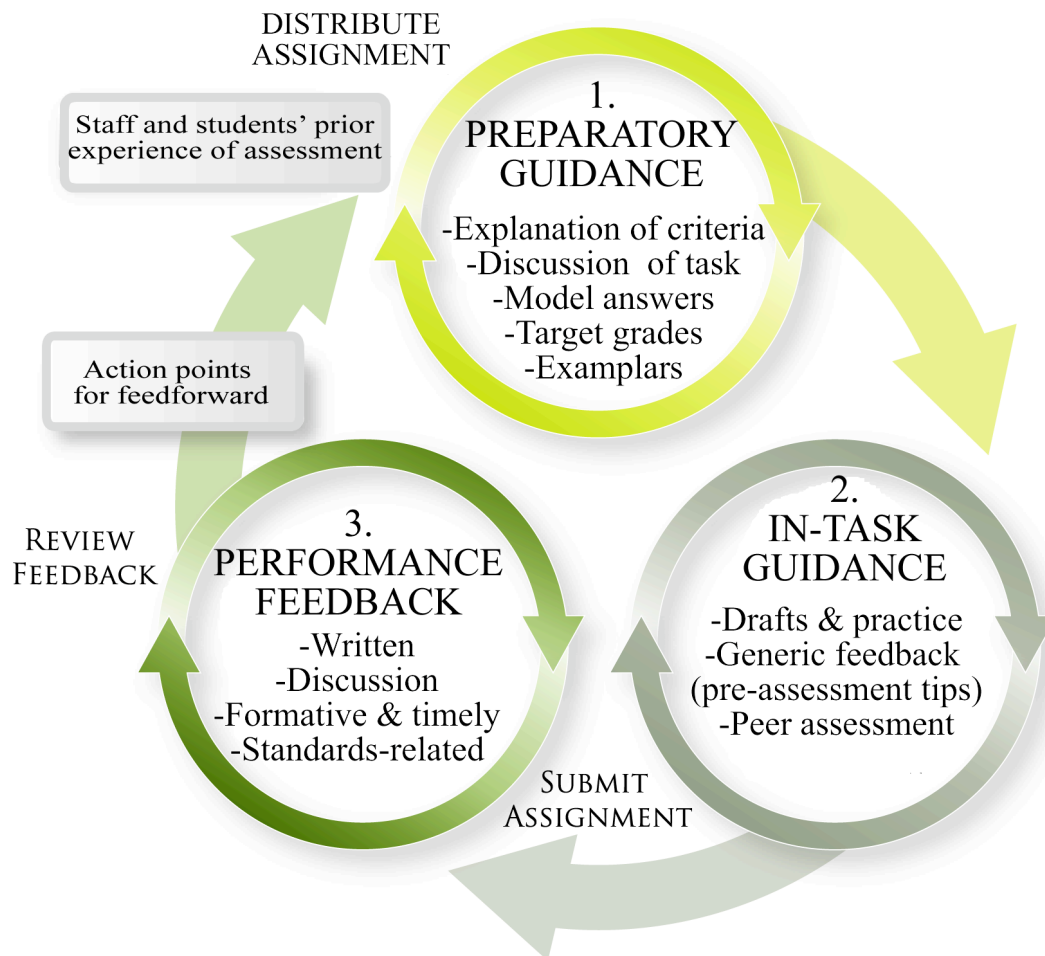
When surveyed about their expectations at university (early in their first term), 91% (mean 1.57, SD 0.82) expected feedback to be given in enough time for it to be useful to them. When surveyed later (at the end of their first year, n=64) only 49% (mean 3.17, SD 1.34) agreed that this had been their experience. Ninety-two per cent (mean 1.46, SD 0.77) expected that feedback would help them to improve their work; only 60% (mean 3.35, SD 1.26) felt that they had actually been able to improve as the result of feedback. Eighty-nine per cent (mean 1.66, SD 0.73) expected to understand the feedback they were given, but only 65% (mean 3.67, SD 0.90) agreed that they understood the feedback they actually received. In each of the above examples it is clear that significant numbers of students do not feel that their expectations of quality feedback are being met. Sixty per cent (mean 3.57, SD 1.16) felt they needed more support in writing their assignments, and only 29% (mean 2.67, SD 1.40) of our sample agreed that feedback is better in university than that given in their previous institution. This is not to suggest that universities should adopt similar systems of feedback to FE colleges, but the dissonance between students' expectations and the actual feedback they receive is a major cause of concern for those who wish to help induct new students into HE.

In summary, our research among students and teachers suggests that schools and colleges operate an integrated feedback process during the A-level courses. This process involves consistent, explicit application of assessment criteria, with extensive use of drafts, exemplars, peer formative assessment, written feedback and frequent accessible support through formal and informal opportunities for dialogue. Figure 2 shows a model of this process, which we call the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (DFC) since the prevalent characteristic that school/FE students described throughout the cycle was dialogue, primarily with the teacher. Each of the phases of the cycle includes characteristics and activities that we discovered to be occurring at that stage. The dialogic and iterative nature of the phases is represented by the arrows around each phase.

The process in schools is aimed at delivering high grades. The value attributed to a grade is unsurprising given the importance they have in determining a student's future. The university entrance system reinforces that importance, since, while we may point the finger at league tables as a strong influence, the value attributed to university applicants is primarily determined by their grades, and consequently it makes universities complicit in this culture.

Both teachers and students used the term 'spoon-feeding' to describe parts of this process, and this approach has consequences since it may develop a dependency culture, rather than one of independence and self-directed study. Teachers acknowledged this as an issue, but considered the pressure to achieve high grades conflicted with the aim of developing independent learning skills.

Figure 2: Dialogic Feedback Cycle in further education



4.3 Teachers' and university tutors' perceptions of what constitutes quality feedback

Thirteen teachers in five schools/colleges participated in individual or group interviews discussing their perceptions of feedback and their own practice. We also interviewed ten university tutors at University *N*.

In all cases, teachers identified the purposes of feedback as to improve performance and to communicate achievement against standards. The standards used were the examination board assessment criteria, and teachers stressed the need for consistent use of these criteria and communication of them to their students. They saw feedback linked explicitly and in detail to the criteria, identifying current performance and actions to be taken to improve. Over half of the schools/colleges reported using individualised target grades for students and linking 'feedback action' to those grades.

Just as students perceived feedback as a continuous process, teachers talked in the same terms using a variety of approaches to engage students with the assessment process and the criteria. All of the teachers reported that they had used forms of peer assessment. This varied from judging recordings of performances to the marking of other students' work. Most of the teachers reported that this had been successful, but one teacher had abandoned it after significant resistance from students. Some teachers reported receiving training in 'Assessment for Learning' methods and CPD sessions including sharing good practice to help develop expertise. Self-assessment was expressed as a common aim, although it was

only reported as actively being reinforced as a process by students and teachers in half of the schools/colleges surveyed. All teachers interviewed reported the use of exemplars, such as previous coursework answers or past examination papers. Teachers indicated that students used these as models in constructing their answers and practiced marking in order to internalise the assessment criteria.

Within the assessment guidance process, all teachers, in all of the schools/colleges, placed a high emphasis on the use of drafts and a rapid turnaround, almost always within a week of submission. They also described a culture where students were expected to find teachers for help outside of class; for example, at the end of the school day. Some teachers stressed the importance of getting to know students and personalising feedback.

Most teachers raised the issues of students' lack of independent study skills and pointed to the need for students to be helped to develop such skills:

... you can't make the leap from a rigidity of thought to a total openness of thought, unless somebody tells you how to do it. (S5P14)

However, teachers highlighted that this conflicts with the demands of the grade culture:

They rely an awful lot on us and in one sense we're the biggest problem, we're the biggest stumbling block to independent learning because we spoon-feed them! We take them every step of the way. (S1Staff3P5)

... independent learning, yeah we all agree with it but very, very, very few students do it and we cannot allow them to do it or to not do it, we have to pick up what they don't do because of league tables. I can say absolutely and utterly ... if they fail, it won't be them that's blamed, it will be me and the school and the school will be pilloried, "oh look where you are in the league tables". (S1Staff1P1)

Other problems reported were: inadequate research and writing skills; the lack of reading by some students; and students not acting on feedback. However, we only discovered one instance where students were monitored against the feedback actions: this occurred where comments on one draft had to be submitted with the next.

When we compared these perceptions and practices with university teachers, we found, as expected, considerable similarities, but different emphasis on purposes of feedback and considerably divergent espoused practices. Ten university teachers at University **N** (Table 2) were interviewed to explore their perceptions of quality feedback, barriers and their practice.

When discussing the purpose of assessment, response of the university teachers was unanimous: they firstly identified *improvement in performance* as the main function:

... to realise this is where they are now, this is where they need to be, if they have reached a very good standard, to encourage them, "this is an excellent standard", "to enable you to develop further..." (US3Staff2)

Most of the tutors (six out of ten) also explicitly identified the importance of motivation in the feedback process and pointed to the way they ordered and expressed comments to ensure that positive motivational remarks were made first.

While all tutors recognised the importance of verbal feedback and dialogue, there was considerable variety in approaches to this, ranging from designing seminar sessions to enable the inclusion of one-to-one and group-tutor discussion, to communicating to students the time and availability of tutor surgery hours and appointments. Within our small sample, it was noticeable that Performing Arts tutors placed greatest emphasis on verbal feedback, both for written submissions and performances.

Most tutors (seven out of ten) also expressed the importance of specific and detailed feedback, and a variety of approaches were used to maximise personal feedback. Examples included: checklists of common errors; criteria met; annotated scripts and detailed comments on feedback sheets. However, every single tutor pointed to the problem of lack of time for

marking and providing feedback as a barrier to providing quality feedback, and most expressed concern that they need to spend considerable time dealing with relatively basic errors in academic writing, rather than being able to focus on higher level aspects.

Perhaps the most significant points to emerge from our analysis concerned the divergence in perceptions and practice from school teachers. It was particularly noticeable that all school teachers discussed quality feedback with regard to achievement against an explicit standard expressed as criteria from the examination board. None of our university tutors foregrounded explicit criteria. Some tutors used tacit marking criteria, though in two out of three departments agreed assessment criteria were available. Only one tutor said that they discussed these actively with the class prior to submission of an assignment. One tutor stated that she set targets for students within the feedback on coursework, although these were not monitored formally.

The second difference that stood out was the diversity of practice concerning formative assessment activities. All of the approaches identified in the study of school practices were used in one way or another, but there was no consistency and the practices largely depended on individual beliefs. There were occasions when exemplars, peer and self-assessment, drafts, post-assessment discussions, and seminars on essay preparation were used. However, the frequency of formative assessment in university was reported as much lower than at school/college. One department designed in a formative review and another included an essay plan to provide opportunities for feedback. While there was acknowledgement that rapid feedback was most beneficial, in general written feedback on written coursework was provided three to four weeks after submission, tutors citing quality assurance processes and workload as barriers to a faster turnaround. One tutor responded to the school 1-week turnaround practice as follows:

Because actually it will be physically impossible, if you never went to bed....if you never went to bed, if you spent all the time when you weren't teaching marking you could not turn round and respond to the work in seven days. (US1Staff1P2)

However, feedback on presentations and performances was provided in a mainly verbal form immediately after the event.

Given the cultural differences in perception and practice, it is hardly surprising that the students experience a shock when they move from the highly regulated school environment to a much more individualistic setting of university. The next section explores these experiences in some detail.

4.4 Strand 2: First-year students' perceptions of experiences

In this section we analyse the data from focus groups in the three subjects at University **N** and Psychology at Universities **M** and **L**. The data were analysed within the framework of the processes in the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle*:

Stage1: Preparatory guidance

Many students considered the transition to university to be something of a culture shock, and the familiar and reassuring regular dialogue that they had experienced with their teachers did not occur so frequently with university tutors. Students showed awareness of the need for independent learning, but did not feel that they were supported in developing those skills:

... nobody really understood that we didn't know the difference between A-level work and university work. (US3FG3)

... thrown in at the deep end ... (US3FG2P6)

Now when we've got into here it just, we've lost all that [support] and you're just like "whoa". (US1FG3P13-14)

The feeling of loss of contact is emphasised in the following quotation, as is the forced reliance on resources rather than a tutor (in the second quotation):

They do warn you about it to be honest, but you don't think it's going to be that extreme. Because the thing that I found is, I knew I wouldn't be force-fed, but this is my first year, I've never done referencing before, I've never had to do certain layouts or anything like that. I've never done this subject before, and then all of a sudden they expect you to know it all just from this sheet. (US1FG3P14)

It's our first time doing anything and I'm, that's what I'm finding, it's our first time doing anything and I don't know what they're expecting, I don't know what they want and if they give us sort of examples, some sort of criteria of what we need in it, just this time, then that would be absolutely fine by me and I would know then from now on, but because they haven't I'm finding it a little confusing. (US2FG2P4)

Interestingly participants underlined the *newness* of university work as a major cause of anxiety, even though most have engaged in some form of academic writing prior to university. The feeling of unfamiliarity is even cognisant when carrying out basic academic tasks such as summarisation as evidenced by the following quote:

They didn't tell us what they were looking for, for us to write about so we were just told "summarise these sections" and we were just like "what do they want us to take out of it?" (US3FG2BP6)

This feeling of forced praxis without theory/understanding has emotional entailments, not least of which is the total re-evaluation of past experiences:

... you're writing absolutely different, so I have to learn everything from new. (US4FG3P6)

Students did express satisfaction when talking about instances where they received guidance and were given clear indication of what was expected. The experience was similar to that reported for pre-university courses above:

... the lecturer said at the end of the session, she said exactly what she wanted from our coursework, and it was very, very good. And I had one of my best marks in this essay, because I knew exactly what she wanted from me ... (US4FG3P14)

This advice appears very directive, but it is helping the student model what is required at university and adjust to the different requirements. Issues of disciplinary identity were also being raised at the end of the first year, as students were recognising different styles and the need for guidance in this area:

I think when you've never written Psychology, you've never used psychological language before there's terms and stuff that if you use it in say an English essay it makes sense and you use it in a Psychology essay it means something completely different and that was quite helpful, for just helping to distinguish between the two. (US4FG3P15)

Stage 2: In-task guidance

The level of in-task guidance received at university was considerably diminished compared to school/college. Marking of drafts by tutors was virtually unknown in the courses sampled, though marking of draft essay plans was offered on one course. Tutors did not report a high take-up of this opportunity.

Students in focus groups expressed anxiety regarding support, and while some felt confident in approaching their tutors, others were unsure who (or where) to go to and were not clear whether it should be a lecturer, module leader, seminar tutor or personal tutor. One course in University **N** was introducing peer mentors as a support mechanism, though this was in the early stages and students expressed reservations about the expertise level and advice received from their peers:

... the actual student isn't going to be the marker. So he won't know exactly what is expected, so I might give out different information compared to someone else ...
(US1FG2P22)

Variation in guidance was not confined to perception of peer mentors, however, and inconsistency of advice, instruction and marking was a theme that was raised in several subjects and universities. Students were being exposed to many more sources of information than in their previous experience and consequently were struggling to come to terms with it at times:

See I've found one person saying one thing and then someone else will say another thing ... it's like, well what do you do? (US1FG2P7)

Even though uni's supposed to be where we use our own initiative and do our work, apparently, we haven't got the information to then go into the initiative and use our own initiative. (US1FG2P9)

An issue raised by students and tutors alike was the lack of time, which for students meant a lack of contact:

That's the main problem. The main problem is that we're ... they're all busy themselves and we're busy ourselves, so they never match, the times when we need to meet them. (US1FG2P10)

In sixth form it was one extreme there was loads of help and then here I don't think there's very much help and here I always feel a little bit guilty asking for help sometimes. (US3FG3)

At the end of the first year this student had developed very negative perceptions:

You know so, sometimes now I'm scared to go and ask and you know, "Excuse me would you have a minute?" because they're probably going to say no, you know and I'm scared of that rejection. (US4FG3P9)

Stage3: Performance feedback on final submission

Students highlighted what they perceived as both good and poor examples of feedback. Where it was cited as being good, two characteristics stood out, consistent with the practice at school: these were the opportunity for *discussion* (especially one-to-one) and *relevant meaningful* feedback that was meaningful to the student and that could be acted on. Students picked out the immediate feedback received on performances and presentations as some of the most useful.

The opportunity to discuss the piece of work and feedback was seen as an unusual, but highly positive point:

The feedback from work Psychology was quite good, but that's because she sat down with us and she went through each individual point. That was for the first piece of coursework that we handed in, it was group coursework and she sat down and she went through what was good and what was bad... (US4FG3P5)

Individual discussion was also coupled with the desire for personalised feedback:

I think more verbal feedback, we had none last time. I think you understand it more when it's talked through. (US2FG3)

Relevant and meaningful feedback is that which students can understand and act on in that context. If it is provided on a draft, then specific comments to improve the draft are appropriate. If the comments are on a final submission, students want to understand how they can improve in the future:

... it was quite useful, he just told us first of all what kind of structure of what mistakes I've got there, of 1.5 spacing etc. Then he came out with the referencing mistakes, I

had quite a lot, then he come out with the other things like the element objectives I had inside ... but I think it depends [on your] you tutor etc. (US1FG3P3)

To tell you the truth I think the feedback that I received was quite exceptional ... she told us what mistakes I made, as I said. The referencing mistakes, the layout mistakes, the spacing mistakes, the grammar mistakes, she just noted them all down, so as soon as I got it back I knew... (US1FG3P5)

Unfortunately, such comments were in the small minority. Students from all universities reported frequent experiences that they rated as poor. The lack of timeliness of feedback was a common criticism; students complained that feedback was too late to be acted upon. They also considered three weeks to be a long time to wait for feedback (a 'standard' in one of the universities). Sometimes feedback sheets were returned without the work, but by far the most frequently expressed dissatisfaction was with the nature and number of comments provided:

We've got comments from our tutor, very few comments about the work. "Is this relevant?" and stuff like that, but not saying why it's not relevant. (US2FG3)

But a lot of them haven't been marked yet, like we've done about ten now ... eight research methods tests and not one of them has been marked yet. (US5FG1P4)

I had one word written on mine, it was 'introduction', that was it. (US5FG1P4)

Consistency was also an issue with regard to the source, amount, level of detail and focus of any feedback received:

You get more than me, I haven't got anything ... which wasn't very useful at all. I've got some personal mentors and they call me [inaudible] they went through the entire essay with me. (US1FG3P3)

I don't know, I mean the main impression that I got from the essay was that references was the main thing that was being marked on ... (US5FG1P4)

Like one or two sentences. Introduction was good. What was good about it? I want to know more detail; they don't really tell you things ... (US4FG3P2)

We had no feedback from the other essay that we handed in, absolutely nothing, so how are we meant to write [the] big essay without the feedback from the smaller one. And the critique, we still haven't really had any feedback for our general critiques have we? You have to badger them for it. (US1FG3P5)

Students struggled to make use of the feedback they received. Some had problems actually understanding what was written, while others failed to see how comments could help them improve. From the student perspective, the nature of feedback intertwines with issues relating to lack of contact with tutors and the unfamiliarity of university work, which serves to further emphasise the feeling that they are not being supported:

... one or two sentences ... you are desperate to read what they're trying to say, but you can't even make out what they're saying sometimes. (US4FG3P9)

Yeah, I think when you get the feedback they usually tell you what was poor but they don't tell you how to improve it, they just put, oh "referencing was poor" or "conclusion was poor", but then they don't really tell you how to bump it up. (US4FG3P3)

All I got, when I [inaudible] of an essay back all it had on it was, "you're going along the right lines". What does that then mean? What about am I doing right? ... It just hasn't been helpful at all ... No I don't think so ... (US1FG3P7-8)

In these quotes it is clear that students value feedback as a means of preparation for the next piece of work. The comments show that they desire engagement with the learning process and to know: 'what are they doing right?' and 'how can they improve?' The impact of not meeting those needs is evident:

And the feedback for me has been absolutely minimal and I've found that more demotivating. (US1FG3P9)

As the year's gone on I've found it more and more demotivating and harder and harder to do it and I just can't do it, because I don't know I'm doing it right or anything. (US1FG3P10)

The use of feedback was a contentious point with a number of tutors, who expressed the view that many students did not make use of feedback. The students involved in our survey and focus groups were insistent that they attempted to make use of feedback where it was meaningful and relevant:

Definitely, referencing was particular for my first kind of essays and the year I changed, changed [inaudible] and adapted the new APA style, so I think that comment, that really did help. (US4FG3P4)

Yeah you have to, even though it's not very good, but what can you do? You know you try. (US4FG3P18)

As suggested above, students often did not see how they could act to improve; sometimes they saw feedback as relating to a single piece of work, while at other times they saw it as too general for them to interpret as meaningful:

Well it's just because like, when they say what you did wrong and are specific to what you've written about and you can't really, like use that for your next essay because they're not telling you in general things, what you can improve and what not. (US4FG3P3)

I had only one coursework back, with the work was attached and the comments in the section, detailed comments, but it happened just once for cognitive Psychology, and later I didn't receive any particular. Very, very, very poor in general. So I don't really know what I had to change. (US4FG3P2)

Yeah it's too general, there's nothing you can do with it, you know. You're going to say, okay this time it was like this, but it's too general to make anything out of it. (US4FG3P13)

In summary, our research among first-year undergraduates at three universities shows a very different picture to that at school and college. The level of support and guidance in the assessment process was perceived to be much lower, and did not meet students' expectations. The inconsistency and lack of meaningful and relevant feedback was reported by students who had anticipated many more opportunities for dialogue with their tutor. A worrying feature was the demotivating effect that it appeared to have on a significant proportion of students.

4.5 Strand 3: Facilitating pedagogical change

In this section, we present an account of the approach taken to plan and introduce interventions designed to improve feedback to first-year students in year-long 30 credit modules in three subject areas of University *N*. These were Psychology, Performing Arts (Theatre Studies) and Education Studies.

The design of this strand was based on two principles: firstly, the process of change management adopted by Black *et al.* (2003), which positioned the researcher as a facilitator to promote discussion of possible interventions with teachers, teachers then progressing to selecting and adapting an intervention that they considered appropriate to the local context. This approach has been successful in schools, and we wanted to test its effectiveness in higher education where, in our experience, it is often difficult to introduce change in teaching practices to course teams.

The second principle involved promoting dialogue between students and academics to develop shared understanding of each other's perceptions of quality feedback. Therefore,

during the first semester, students and tutors at University **N** participating in the focus groups and staff interviews were to be asked to identify barriers to good practice. Following this dialogue, a subject-specific strategy would be devised to promote quality feedback within the three disciplines: Education Studies; Performing Arts (Theatre Studies) and Psychology. We then hoped to evaluate the effectiveness of both the strategies developed and the process of change.

We considered the most important feature of this approach to be the owning of any intervention by the course team, and therefore the choice of intervention, based on student feedback, was theirs. As a consequence, we expected considerable diversity and thought it would be unlikely that a rigorous evaluation of any intervention could be completed within the restricted timescale of this project (one academic year).

This philosophy entailed some risk and in the final analysis meant that data from the Psychology departments at Universities **L** and **M** could not be included at this stage. Tutors at these institutions chose interventions that aimed to further develop existing action research projects, and the different scheduling of semesters between institutions meant that the time available for the implementation of interventions differed between institutions. Therefore, it was decided that no useful comparison of the data for interventions in Psychology courses across institutions could be made. Reflections on the experience of change at Universities **L** and **M** will be used to inform further analysis of the embedding process in University **N** in future research.

At University **N**, the initial process was the same in all three subject areas: the researcher interviewed academics and conducted focus groups with students at the start of the academic year. The discussions with students aimed to establish their perceptions of feedback quality and prior experience of feedback in school or college. Within semi-structured interviews, academics were given the opportunity to reflect upon their own experience of feedback and their current practice within their discipline. Subsequently, a second set of focus groups with students, conducted towards the end of the first semester, captured students' initial experiences of feedback at university.

Due to time constraints and the need to ensure anonymity, it was the principal researcher who then fed back student experiences to staff and facilitated course team discussion, thereby establishing a feedback loop. Following on from this process, interventions were proposed and subsequently designed. It is worth noting at this point that tutors and students generally appeared to identify similar areas of concern about the barriers to formative feedback within their discipline. In particular, both staff and students in Education Studies expressed concern at the staff-student ratio and the time available to give pre-assessment guidance or quality feedback on drafts; in Psychology, there was a common awareness of the expectation of independent learning, but doubts as to whether the current assignment checklist effectively enabled students to self-evaluate their work prior to submission; and in Performing Arts (Theatre Studies), there was a shared perception regarding the need for on-task guidance in writing for assessment, in addition to summative feedback on the assignment itself. The existence of such shared areas of concern, albeit from different perspectives, appears to strengthen the case for dialogue between staff and students on assessment practices.

These thematic concerns from the focus groups and staff interviews became the starting point for further discussions with the course team about the interventions to be piloted in response to student feedback. It was an expectation of the research design that tutors would not only contribute to identifying barriers to quality feedback, but also take the lead in implementing an intervention to improve practice within each of the three disciplines. In practice this did not happen; the reasons in each case are outlined below and discussed in further detail in the reflection. As a result, this aspect of the project became action research for one of the project team, who as a member of the university Writing Centre and the *Write Now* CETL, became directly involved in implementing the agreed interventions. For this

reason, a reflective account of this experience has been chosen as the most appropriate means of evaluating the process of change at this stage. The points made in the reflection are informed by post-intervention interviews carried out with course leaders and students involved in the delivery of the interventions, and their evaluations have provided a degree of cross-validation.

Although the chosen interventions can all be characterised as providing formative feedback, the chosen strategies diverged significantly, so these are outlined below first. Supporting evidence for the claims made here about the focus group and staff interview data can be found in the results section of this report. There then follows an account of the experience of implementing these interventions and, finally, a brief reflection on the process of change highlights key implications for future practice and concludes this section of the report.

4.5.1 Performing Arts

Two of the three Performing Arts (Theatre Studies) tutors involved in the research programme were part-time and one was hourly paid; two were new to the department and one was a former student who is now a lecturer. Despite their varying backgrounds, all three tutors expressed concern that a significant number of current students needed support in writing for assessment to enable them to make the transition from school or sixth form to university. They described the time needed to give this type of formative feedback as one of their greatest challenges.

Tutors commented on the difficulty of balancing expectations of independent study with the reality of their students' need for guidance in academic writing. For example, the departmental policy allowed for feedback on only one draft of the first portfolio assignment, and thereafter self-directed academic study was required on which summative feedback was given. Students themselves identified a lack of confidence in academic writing and a lack of understanding of what was required in their university assignments as driving their need for reassurance in the form of ongoing feedback. Their expectations of feedback were informed by prior experience at school and sixth form of pre-task guidance, such as being able to discuss task requirements and drafts in class, and of having access to exemplar material.

Both tutors and students identified pre-task and ongoing guidance at the point of writing as the intervention needed to overcome the barrier of a perceived lack of formative feedback. The intervention decided upon by tutors in response to student feedback was from a supplementary source, the University Writing Centre. Subsequently six one-hour workshops were delivered by a member of the Writing Centre/*Write Now* staff. The curriculum content was driven by the needs of students as identified through the focus groups, and curriculum materials were developed in consultation with the course leader and tutors participating in the research. Tutors received advice on an individual basis from the workshop tutor regarding appropriate activities to include into seminar sessions, such as the use of exemplar material and the discussion of assessment criteria.

The writing workshops were voluntary and open to the seminar groups of the three tutors participating in the research, who all encouraged their groups to attend. Attendance was high in comparison to the uptake for generic Writing Centre workshops, with between two-thirds and a third of each cohort attending the sessions at least once. The workshops attracted a broad range of ability and gave students the opportunity to discuss their assignment brief, analyse the task criteria, work with exemplar material, and to discuss drafts and their writing process. During the first semester students in focus groups had expressed reluctance to engage in peer assessment of their writing due to a lack of confidence, so this activity was not included in workshops; instead, student writers were encouraged to share their work with 'a reader' from their informal peer support network as well as the workshop tutor.

A member of the *Write Now* research team not involved in the delivery of the workshops took feedback on the intervention in a third focus group, and this feedback was cross-validated by a sampling of end-of-course student evaluations.

4.5.2 Psychology

All the seminar tutors (nine) teaching the first-year foundation course in Psychology participated in the research study at the request of the course leader, who wanted to ensure a consistent approach. In discussion, tutors repeatedly expressed concerns that first-year undergraduates were not sufficiently self-directed, citing the example of their use of the assessment checklist, which students were expected to complete prior to submission of their assignment essay. A copy of the checklist was included in the course handbook, was available online to download and copies could be collected from the departmental office. Yet tutors perceived that this was only completed in a superficial manner as a 'tick-box' exercise, usually at the last minute.

In the focus groups, students readily acknowledged the need to be more independent in their studies, but raised the issue of the checklist themselves as something that they just engaged with on a superficial level. Clear reasons were given: students often downloaded the self-assessment form once they had completed their essay thinking that this was part of the submission rather than the writing process, while those who collected the submission form from the departmental office found the checklist on the reverse side, by which time the essay was complete and students were reluctant or unable to make any changes. Students admitted to ticking boxes in the hope that tutors would not notice and argued that at submission stage they were hardly likely to admit to having used the wrong font or not included an argument. Others noted that the checklist was a list of things to include in the assignment, but did not appear to be linked to grade criteria, of which they also said they were unaware. All the students in the focus groups claimed that they had worked to the requirements of grade descriptors or target grades while at school or college, but no-one said they had used the checklist while writing their assignments during the first semester, and the majority appeared unsure of its purpose or how to use it effectively.

As a consequence of feeding back these findings, tutors agreed that the current checklist was not working and that an appropriate intervention would be to revise this and create a more effective tool to improve the quality of self-assessment feedback. A request was then made for this process to be supported as a professional development activity with workshops for both staff and students being delivered by a member of the *Write Now* team. Due to time constraints and staff availability, this developmental work could not be scheduled until the end of the academic year, after the students had submitted their final assignment. This meant that the revised checklist could not be used by first-year students working on their assignments in the academic year of the research project.

Therefore, to give Psychology students the same opportunity for continuing development, it was agreed that workshops would be held in which all first-year undergraduates would be able to practise self-assessment using the revised tool, once their final assignment had been submitted but prior to grades having been given out. These sessions would be used to pilot the self-assessment checklist, and feedback from students would inform future use.

The agreed intervention took place in three stages:

- At a lecture to disseminate the interim results of the research project to the entire first-year cohort, students were reminded of the existing checklist, and copies of this and the existing format of grade descriptors were distributed. The course leader reported that seminar tutors still felt that their students did not use the information in any meaningful way in their subsequent, final assignment. At the end of this dissemination event, students were informed that seminar workshops would be taking place on self-assessment, and they were asked to bring along a copy of their final assignment. Reminders were sent out online by the course leader.
- A staff workshop led by a member of the *Write Now* research team was held in the second semester. This session explored the possibility of mapping identified core criteria onto existing grade descriptors to create a meaningful self-assessment tool.

At the end of this workshop tutors produced an agreed self-assessment grid for use in student workshops.

- Student workshops for all first-year students were held in May towards the end of the academic year. These sessions were led by a member of the *Write Now* team and in most cases the seminar tutor was present. The workshops introduced students to the purpose of the self-assessment tool and explained the terms of the core criteria, which were linked to both grades and percentage marks. In the seminar sessions students were asked to assess their own essay using the self-assessment grid and award a mark/grade. Grades were then distributed by the seminar tutor and comparisons made.

As the third focus group for Psychology students had to be timetabled prior to these workshops, a second member of the *Write Now* research team took post-session feedback in a random sample of the workshops.

4.5.3 Education Studies

Of the two seminar tutors involved in the research study, one was taken seriously ill during the project and the workload of the remaining tutor meant that collaboration was limited. The additional involvement of two course leaders in the research project, therefore, proved vital in driving planning of the agreed intervention forward. Each course tutor was responsible for two seminar groups so a total of four Education Studies seminar groups took part in the research project, either by completing questionnaires or participating in focus groups.

The Education Studies department has an established pastoral mentoring programme, which involves two days training at the university's activity centre in Wales at the start of the academic year. At least one, and in practice generally two, second-year mentors are attached to a seminar group to work with the tutor to provide generic support for first-year undergraduates. During the first semester, mentors are available to give feedback on drafts for the essay component of the portfolio assignment and students are directed by the assessment guidelines to access this support.

During the first and second focus groups held throughout the first semester, students raised significant questions about this peer mentoring system. In particular, students questioned the training that mentors received in giving feedback on the assessment tasks and raised the issue of their status as peers, rather than 'expert' tutors. At the same time, students were keen to report the dedication of individual tutors and acknowledged that they were only too aware of the workloads and time constraints under which staff operated. In view of these realities, students participating in the focus groups identified the use of trained mentors as a possible means of addressing their perceived barrier to receiving quality feedback, namely of a lack of formative guidance.

Staff, likewise, readily acknowledged that a lack of time and the reality of workloads impacted upon their capacity to give formative feedback, even on summatively assessed work. The use of peer mentors was thought to be a constructive way to deal with these conflicting demands. Students' perception that mentors needed to be trained to give quality feedback on their drafts proved to be one shared by course leaders. They had noted the need to upskill mentors recruited on the basis of their suitability for a generic, pastoral mentoring programme. Staffing constraints, a lack of time and a perceived lack of expertise in how to do this had meant that this observation had not been actioned, but this was now chosen as the agreed intervention. To improve the quality of feedback, a request was made for the Writing Centre and the *Write Now* team to develop a training programme that would enable mentors to give peer feedback on academic writing for assessment.

In consultation with the Education Studies course leaders, the University Writing Centre and the research team, it was decided to deliver a pilot training session to existing second-year mentors who were working with the four seminar groups involved in the research project.

The decision was taken that a full training programme could only commence in the next academic year with the recruitment of new mentors.

The reasons for this approach were as follows:

- It was recognised that mentors accessing a *Write Now* training scheme would need to be recruited in the same way as Writing Centre peer tutors, on the basis of both their pastoral and writing skills.
- Potential mentors would need to be aware of and agree to undertake this additional training in supporting the development of academic writing.
- A guiding principle of the practice of both the University Writing Centre and the *Write Now* research project is to encourage staff ownership of any intervention. Therefore, it was felt that developing the programme over the longer period of an academic year would allow for this essential collaboration.

One workshop on the writing process was delivered in the second semester by the Writing Centre Co-ordinator and a *Write Now* learning and teaching fellow. Six of the eight mentors attended the session; two mentors were unable to participate due to prior commitments. A member of the *Write Now* research team took feedback on this session.

4.5.4 Reflection on the process of change

On reflection it appears a significant finding that all the barriers identified by students and tutors during the research project related to the quality of formative feedback on writing for assessment, particularly at the pre- and in-task stage of the assignment cycle. During this process of change there developed a shared perception, albeit to different degrees, that this was an area in which feedback quality needed to be improved. Reflecting upon the process by which formative assessment can become embedded in the school curriculum, Black *et al.* (2003) observed at the conclusion of their own research that if students are to take responsibility for their learning they must be shown how to do this, teachers cannot make this happen “just by wishing” (p.84).

In highlighting the need for ongoing guidance (for example, through access to exemplar materials and the opportunity to discuss drafts), students participating in the research project demonstrated a similar awareness, namely that the expectation of student autonomy alone is insufficient to make it a reality. The *hugely positive feedback* (UT1) on the writing workshops in course evaluations, noted by the course leader for Performing Arts (Theatre Studies) further validates the finding that students want the provision of more formative feedback at the pre- and in-task stage of the assessment cycle during the first year at university. This perception was a prevalent theme of all the focus groups; the need for more guidance being expressed by the majority of students participating in the research project across all three disciplines. In discussing the interventions to be made, tutors acknowledged the need to structure assessment activities far more than they had hitherto believed to be necessary.

However, to bring about this change, tutors identified the urgent need for professional development to enable them to ‘front load’ their teaching practice to provide the pre- and in-task guidance that students appeared to increasingly expect. One new tutor, for example, readily acknowledged that while current tutor training courses developed a theoretical understanding of formative assessment, the writing workshops in Performing Arts (Theatre Studies) gave a practical insight into how students’ need for structured guidance might be met through the explicit articulation of the assignment task and criteria, in-class discussion of drafts and the use of exemplar material. Reflecting upon their own research on the development of formative assessment in schools, Black *et al.* (2003) concluded that significant changes in classroom teaching were required, and this proved equally true in the higher education sector.

However, there were also concerns as to the time-consuming nature of feedback on drafts, and a significant number of tutors described students’ expectations in this respect as

unrealistic, *I think that it is their ideas that need to be changed* (UT2), and that the answer to student dissatisfaction was the management of these expectations, *should we give into this? I think we should make a stand on this one* (UT3). Exemplars were seen by some as problematic, given concerns regarding plagiarism and a need for originality in higher education. In particular, there were frequent reservations that formative activities, such as drafts and exemplars, could constitute ‘spoon-feeding’ and a ‘dumbing down’ of independent learning (Haggis, 2006). However, the term ‘independent learning’ is problematic in itself (O’Doherty, 2006), both from the point of view of being ill-defined and its connotation of “going it alone” (Knight, 1996, p.35).

Our conclusion is that such perceptions form a barrier to the embedding of what is perceived as quality feedback by students and also draws attention to the urgent need for a wider debate as to what is meant by the concept of independent learning in higher education today.

Yet when students discussed quality feedback, they often did so in relation to being able to discuss drafts and the use of exemplar material. In practice, therefore, preconceptions about independent learning appeared to make embedding such formative tasks in their teaching problematic for a majority of tutors across all three disciplines. For example, one tutor stated:

... we have a policy of not accepting drafts in the department and I don't like exemplars, they are supposed to be independent and if you use exemplars there is the danger they will become formulaic, they will copy, that is not what higher education is about, really they shouldn't need exemplars at this stage, exemplars of what? They should be working that out for themselves. (UT3)

This raises the question as to whose responsibility it is to develop such independent learning. Tutors varied in the degree to which they were willing to engage in this process, depending upon their personal expectations of student autonomy and their own time constraints. All tutors involved in this research project, however, were united in perceiving that they could not implement interventions to improve feedback quality without themselves receiving support and advice. Two interventions were led by a member of the *Write Now* CETL, while a third drew on the experience of developing the *Write Now* funded mentoring programme in the University’s Writing Centre and was led by the Writing Centre Co-ordinator.

On reflection, a key finding of this experience of attempting to change feedback practice was that tutors cannot be expected to implement new strategies for formative assessment without account being taken of their need for professional development. Therefore, in planning for tutors to lead the interventions in the second semester the research design was too ambitious; however, in demonstrating what could be done, an important first step towards that goal was taken.

One surprising finding emerged from this aspect of the research: students generally proved reluctant or expressed themselves unable to engage in peer or self-assessment, despite the fact that approximately half to one-third of the students in each focus group had experience of peer assessment in further education. Students expressed concerns about: issues of trust in unknown peers; the expectation of feedback from an ‘expert’ tutor; and a perceived lack of knowledge of ‘what they want’, leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to make such judgements.

In response to these significant reservations, tutors who had tried to introduce peer and self-assessment also requested support to develop these strategies in a more systematic way to deal with these perceived problems. In this way, the research findings drew attention to the complexity of implementing strategies recommended as good practice. Feedback from the piloting of the self-assessment tool and the mentor training validated the need for tutors to scaffold students’ understanding of self-assessment techniques and the need to prepare students for the process of peer feedback, as both students and peer mentors during the

interventions frequently expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to make such judgements.

One criticism of the self-evaluation workshop was that this was too late, with yet another student observing that the opportunity to practice self-assessment would not have meant anything at the beginning of the academic year. This dialogue points to an important finding in relation to the impact of any strategy to improve feedback, that the timing of such interventions is crucial. Acknowledging this, the first-year course leader in Psychology has rescheduled the formative guidance so that it is 'front loaded' and has *now put everything before the first essay, which is when they need it* (UT4).

Timing meant that the impact of some interventions upon students' experience of feedback was more immediate than others. The workshops in academic writing (Performing Arts) took place during the second semester and received a positive response from both tutors and students, although one tutor noted that some students had a *remedial perception* of the workshops, a common occurrence when writing development is not embedded within the discipline (Lillis, 2006). The embedding of some of the content of the workshop sessions in the curriculum delivered by subject tutors to all first-year undergraduates this year is designed to address this issue. In Psychology, *people are still discussing* (UT4) the self-assessment feedback sheet, and this is to be used by students this academic year; while in Education Studies, what the pilot intervention *actually led on to is even more valuable* (UT5), with the continuing development of a training programme for mentors in supporting academic writing. With course leaders observing that the project was a *valuable way of initiating curriculum change* (UT5) further research is required to evaluate the impact of embedding these interventions.

One aspect of quality feedback was notably absent from our discussions with university tutors. No one referred to examples of when their own teaching had been changed as a result of student feedback. Indeed, for many tutors participation in the research project gave them a rare moment to:

... step back from the pit face of actually doing it and actually look at what we were doing in terms of effectiveness. There was a critical friend element which was very useful for me anyway ... (UT5)

Lecturers agreed that the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon their own feedback practice was rare, with one course leader commenting:

I think we got more out of it than you did – we saw the interviews as an opportunity – luxury that we would not have had time for otherwise everyone focused on the same thing ... I think they got a lot out of it. (UT4)

Above all, it was the feeding back of students' prior experiences of assessment practices in school or college settings that appeared to have most impact upon tutors. The following quote is characteristic of a prevailing lack of knowledge of students' prior assessment experience and a realisation that this should be part of professional development:

... in my ignorance I had no idea of the situation at A-level/BTEC in terms of drafting particularly in written work ... the scales fell away from my eyes because no wonder when students come in and we say "well we'll look at an essay plan, and if you're lucky we'll look at a draft" and then that's it ... and if suddenly that support mechanism – which I think is questionable pedagogically – but is no longer there so I suddenly perceived the whole process in a slightly more sympathetic light because I think first year – there's a huge kind of shift – so that was very useful, that's stayed with me. I think that is important for all first-year tutors to realise. I don't think I was alone in my ignorance. (UT1)

Above all, therefore, it was the dialogic approach of the research project that proved to be the key intervention. This enabled the research team not only to identify staff and student perceptions of feedback quality, but also to create a feedback loop in which they were shared, and this proved to be the crucial first step in any attempt to facilitate changes in feedback practice.

For Black *et al.* (2003) changes in feedback practice in schools require “new modes of pedagogy” (p.10). The conclusion of this reflection on this process of change is that formative assessment can only be fully realised through a revisioning of higher education pedagogy, through a more explicit articulation of what we mean by independent learning and an open debate about how this can be achieved in reality. For what emerges most clearly from this experience of attempting to change feedback practice is that tutors’ expectations of independent learning form a significant barrier to the effective implementation of formative assessment.

5. Conclusions

In the last three years, the National Student Surveys have highlighted students’ dissatisfaction with the quality of university tutors’ feedback. The results of our research have illuminated the fault line that exists between assessment practices at school and university, and the model derived from this evidence provides the basis for an explanation of the dissatisfaction, together with pointers for improvement.

While much research has been conducted on experiences of students in schools and higher education, we have found little that investigates the impact of the former on the latter. Our results have shown a clear contrast in student perceptions of those experiences and particular issues involving the step-change from a largely dependent culture at school to an assumed self-directed learning culture in higher education. In this section we draw together the most important points from our results to provide a rationale for our recommendations.

The results of a qualitative study are inevitably open to questions of general validity and the majority of our data concerning university students have been collected in one university. However, data from two other regionally dispersed universities also provided further support for our conclusions. In the school-based study, data from six schools and colleges also showed high levels of consistency. Our iterative approach to research meant that the findings that emerged during the year were constantly compared within and across educational sectors. Consequently, we are confident in the robustness of our results within this context and that our conclusions represent a research finding in their own right.

Given the scope of our study, with data collection from the real world, we believe that our conclusions are more credible for being grounded in an informed understanding of the assessment systems of both sectors. Such an approach we believe enhances, rather than limits, the likelihood that students and staff beyond these institutions will be able to relate to our findings. Therefore, we propose that the conclusions outlined below can serve as a very strong basis for further investigations.

5.1 Reconceptualising feedback as a guidance process

When we discussed the meaning of quality feedback with students and school teachers, they unanimously talked about continuous feedback as dialogue within a cyclical assessment process. Feedback was never considered as a single event. Our literature review also shows that the concept of quality feedback is gradually changing in the research community from that of an expert correcting a student’s errors, towards a student-centred process model (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hounsell, 2006; Rust *et al.*, 2003). Reconceptualising feedback as a process (or system), rather than an event, is important since it highlights the time-dependent nature of particular feedback activities. It also corresponds to the progressive construction of meaning by students as they make progress through the process. Principles of good practice (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick,

2006) are useful, but are not enough on their own: they also need to be systematically implemented at suitable point(s) in the cycle to be effective.

We have modelled the experiences of school students using the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (Figure 2). This model is derived from empirical data: at each stage in this model we have identified activities and artefacts that were reported by participants and consequently it is underpinned by a strong evidence base. This model builds on previous ones cited above by emphasising the iterative and formative discussion at three key stages of students working through an assessed coursework task. The three stages also highlight important activities at each point, enabling the model to be used both for analysing current practice and for planning course design. While there are strong similarities between the DFC and the guidance and feedback cycle proposed by Hounsell (2006), we found little evidence of post-submission supplementary support in schools and colleges, where the emphasis on guidance and support occurred much earlier in the cycle as in-task guidance from a consistent source: the expert teacher.

Although school students perceive their feedback experience as a cycle of guidance, university practice is not aligned with this perception (see below). In schools this cycle delivers improved grades, but not self-directed learning skills; however, we do not consider this to be an intrinsic shortcoming of the cycle, on the contrary, we suggest that the cycle can also be adapted to the higher education context as a means of scaffolding the development of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975, p.18).

5.2 Student perceptions of quality feedback

This project aimed to analyse any changes in students' perceptions of quality feedback throughout their first year of university experience. Implicit in this aim was the assumption that these perceptions would change. In fact in our study, university students' perceptions of quality feedback (norms) remained stable throughout this crucial first year and undergraduates across three institutions and within three different disciplines continued to emphasise the same quality attributes as school or college students. Thematic analysis of transcripts from focus groups held at significant milestones consistently demonstrates that first-year undergraduates continued to perceive quality feedback as important for improvement, articulated a strong desire to receive guidance prior to the submission of an assignment and repeatedly reported that they try to take notice of feedback. Quality was defined as feedback that was timely, provided detailed explanatory comments and was supplemented with the opportunity for discussion, ideally one-to-one and face-to-face with tutors. A large majority of students expressed the desire that feedback should include a grade as a standard indicator and criterion-referenced comments to enable them to improve. In particular, students viewed the opportunity to discuss drafts and have access to exemplars as vital aspects of quality feedback.

The stability of these perceptions and the close relationship to school practice indicates that students developed their perceptions of quality feedback at school where, as we have demonstrated, feedback is experienced as a guidance process within the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle*. Thus, students arrive at university conditioned by the experience of high levels of interaction with teachers, and a system focused on delivering improvement in performance as measured by grades. Given this prior experience, it is not surprising that feedback in higher education is found not to meet students' expectations of quality. Particular weaknesses articulated by students are identified in the first two stages of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle*: students perceived that they receive little preparatory guidance ("what they are looking for"), with few if any opportunities for formative feedback in the form of discussion of written comments made by a tutor. Further reported issues identified at Stage 3 related to: consistency of marking by teams of tutors; timeliness of feedback; and, on occasion, a lack of detail in written feedback.

However, undergraduates frequently referred to the school experience as *spoon-feeding*, with tutors also highlighting students' lack of independent learning skills. Thus, while quality

feedback continued to be defined with regard to prior experience of a process of formative guidance, there was increasing awareness that the way in which this process was implemented in schools did little to prepare prospective entrants for the realities of assessment in higher education.

This 'assessment gap' contributes to the culture shock of arriving at university. Despite the fact that the crucial importance of feedback in learning was widely acknowledged by university tutors, the students we surveyed did not believe that feedback in the first year adequately supports them through the unfamiliar assessment practices at university, particularly as they felt they lacked the skills for independent learning. As a result, some strongly negative feelings were expressed by a small minority of students as the year progressed. Interestingly, whereas the National Student Surveys indicate final-year students' dissatisfaction regarding the quality of feedback, our findings established that this perception is already prevalent within the first three months of university experience, and we have provided evidence that this mismatch is rooted in students' preconceptions of feedback as a guidance process.

5.3 Inconsistencies in tutor perceptions of feedback practices

All teachers, university tutors (and students) alike emphasised the purpose of feedback for student improvement and learning. However, our interpretation of the interview data is that most tutors perceive feedback primarily as a post-summative assignment event rather than as a process of discussion starting with the assignment brief and criteria. The focus on explicit criteria was much more evident in schools/colleges, with some university tutors admitting to using tacit marking criteria. A striking feature of the practice reported at university was the inconsistency of feedback methods and formative assessment practices. There was little consistency within the departments we surveyed regarding preparatory guidance, peer assessment, drafts, and verbal and written practices. Given the size of our sample it was not possible to glean any reliable evidence of differences in perceptions of quality feedback between disciplines, though Performing Arts tutors appeared to give more emphasis to verbal feedback than the other subjects surveyed. Tutors also reported receiving no training about how to provide quality feedback in the context of traditional university tuition, even though a number had completed accredited PGCTLHE courses.

Tutors we interviewed reported giving extensive and detailed written feedback on assignments and recognised the importance of motivational comments, although very few of the students who took part in the focus groups stated that this is what they received. Consequently, there is a significant mismatch between students' and tutors' perceptions of the feedback experience.

5.4 Barriers to quality feedback at university

We see this mismatch of perceptions as one of the main barriers to achieving quality feedback at university. Students are expecting detailed guidance, while tutors frequently cited the importance of independent learning. The approach used in schools and colleges is focused on delivering high grades at A-level. This is partly driven by school league tables, but the universities are also complicit: grades are used to determine access to higher education. It is difficult to see how the current high dependency school system can deliver independent learning, and given the demands to achieve high grades, teachers have stated that it is unlikely that schools and colleges will change in the near future. We therefore conclude that it is the responsibility of the universities to adapt their feedback practice in the first year to address this issue and ease the transition by taking more consideration of students' prior experience. In our view, a prime aim of the first-year university curriculum should be *explicitly to teach* students how to become self-directed learners, simply *providing the opportunity* is not enough.

We suggest that the DFC can have a significant role here: firstly, as a diagnostic tool to analyse current assessment feedback practice, which can highlight where students may be experiencing particular difficulties; and secondly, as a framework in which to position new

activities. The specific activities within each stage of the cycle would be those identified by a course team for their particular context. Adapting the DFC in this way could be particularly beneficial since the process is familiar to students and will also enhance student confidence in their learning.

A further barrier to quality feedback is the reduction in the unit of resource with the expansion of higher education. This has led to a reduction, and possible removal of formative assessment from courses and reduced timeliness, quality and quantity of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004):

... it's becoming unrealistic ... by the time you ... even made a few formative comments you're still taking 10 to 15 minutes, it just isn't possible. (US1Staff1nP)

The feedback activities valued highly by students are those related to formative assessment, in particular drafts and exemplars. Tutors may lavish hours of written feedback comments, but these are mainly on summative assessment, at Stage 3 of the DFC. Tutors also comment that students often do not even pick up such assignments and do not attend to comments. This contradicts the students' own assertion that they value and take notice of feedback. However, the two statements are not necessarily mutually exclusive – students may see relevant comments as those they can use to improve immediate performance, in other words, formative draft feedback. Our evidence suggests comments are ignored where they are perceived as irrelevant or too late which is usually when it occurs on the summative component of an assignment.

One approach that could mitigate resource issues is the use of peer and self-assessment, and perhaps the most important benefit of this approach is that stated by Boud and Falchikov (2007), who argue that developing these abilities is one of the keys to self-directed learning and sustainable assessment. A naive analysis could therefore see peer assessment as the silver bullet that addresses the weakness of self-directed learning, while accommodating the decrease in unit of resource. However, our results showed peer assessment was not popular among first-year students: issues of trust, perceived expertise and competence were major concerns. Thus, a further major challenge is the design of curricula to teach students how to perform peer (and self-) assessment effectively.

5.5 Facilitating change

Attempting to change assessment practice is not easy (William, 2006) and can have profound implications. Reflecting upon their research into how formative interventions might be effectively embedded in schools, Black *et al.* (2003) conclude that this requires nothing less than a change in classroom practice and “new modes of pedagogy” (p.10). Our own attempt to experiment with this model of change in higher education has led to similar conclusions.

It was significant that the interventions agreed by students and tutors related to the provision of formative feedback on writing for assessment, particularly at the pre- and in-task stages of the assignment cycle. We conclude from this that through dialogue there developed a shared perception, albeit to different degrees, that this is the area in which feedback quality needed to be improved. Reflecting upon the process by which formative assessment can become embedded in the school curriculum, Black *et al.* (2003) observed at the conclusion of their own research that if students are to take responsibility for their learning they must be shown how to do this, teachers cannot just make this happen “just by wishing” (p.84). In highlighting the need for ongoing guidance, for example through access to exemplar materials and the opportunity to discuss drafts, students participating in this action research demonstrated a similar awareness, namely that the expectation of student autonomy alone is insufficient to make it a reality. In discussing the three interventions to be made, tutors acknowledged a need to structure assessment activities far more than they had hitherto believed necessary.

Tutors expressed the urgent need for professional development to enable them to ‘front load’ their teaching practice to provide the pre- and in-task guidance that students increasingly expect and to develop strategies for scaffolding self-directed learning through peer and self-

assessment. There were also concerns as to the time-consuming nature of feedback on drafts and requests for help to resolve this. Exemplars were seen by some as problematic, given concerns regarding plagiarism and the need for originality in higher education. In particular, there were frequent reservations that formative activities, such as drafts and exemplars, could constitute 'spoon-feeding' or what has been called a 'dumbing down' of independent learning (Haggis, 2006), and this drew attention to the problematic nature of this ill-defined term (O'Doherty, 2006). Our conclusion is that such preconceptions form a barrier to the embedding of what is perceived as quality feedback by students.

At the heart of the problematic nature of achieving quality feedback in practice is a mismatch in staff and student perceptions as to how competing needs for independence and guidance should be negotiated; therefore, a wider debate is urgently required as to the meaning of these concepts in higher education today. Students perceive that quality feedback not only improves learning, it enables their learning about learning in higher education and drives their academic orientation during the first year. If students receive this kind of feedback, they will eventually be "able to judge the quality of what they are producing and are able to regulate what they are doing in the doing of it" (Sadler, 1989, p.121), and the key criterion of quality feedback will be met. In the final analysis, it is the quality of students' own feedback to themselves on their own work in progress that matters. Therefore, greater attention needs to be paid to how this sustainable skill of self-evaluation can be developed.

One surprising finding emerged from this aspect of the research: students generally proved reluctant or expressed themselves unable to engage in peer or self-assessment; despite the fact that peer assessment at least seemed a relatively common experience in further education. Issues of trust in unknown peers, the expectation of feedback from an *expert* tutor, a perceived lack of knowledge of *what they want* leading to a lack of confidence in their ability to make such judgements all played a part. Again, we conclude that there is an urgent need for a structured introduction to these activities with the explicit development of peer and self-assessment skills.

These are strategies that are recommended as good practice; only by dialogue with students did we learn of their reservations and possible limitations, and this in turn led to an attempt to implement them more effectively. In the final analysis, therefore, we conclude that it was the dialogic approach that proved to be the key intervention. This enabled the research team not only to identify staff and student perceptions of feedback quality, but also to create a feedback loop in which they were shared, and this proved to be the crucial first step in any attempt to facilitate changes in feedback practice.

6. Recommendations

In the light of our findings a number of issues identified during our review of current assessment practice can now be usefully reframed. For example, the literature review highlights the problem of student engagement with feedback, yet our research revealed few activities within university courses that are designed to involve students actively in these aspects of assessment, and the problem is further aggravated by the mismatch in assessment culture between school and higher education. The former is based on high levels of formative assessment and dialogue; the latter is primarily based on summative assessment, written feedback and an assumption that students possess self-directed learning skills. It is this mismatch in perceptions that constitutes a significant barrier to improving the quality of feedback.

At the outset of this report we drew attention to the fact that the title and therefore the focus of our study acknowledged the context of widening participation that now frames the assessment practices of all higher education institutions. Our study has clearly shown that for tutors, a rapid expansion and diversification of higher education at the same time as a significant reduction of the unit of resource (Gibbs, 2006) has simply exacerbated the challenges of meeting student expectations of quality feedback. However, as one teacher in

our study observed, universities need to adapt to the situation created by mass higher education or retreat back to an elite system. From this perspective, the use of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* appears to be not so much part of the problem, but a possible solution.

Our recommendations for improving the quality of feedback to students in first-year university classes are primarily to redesign curricula explicitly to build in formative activities and refocus effort on the first two stages of the *Dialogic Feedback Cycle* (DFC), saving time by reducing summative assessment feedback at Stage 3 (post submission). In particular we suggest that courses should:

6.1 Explicitly teach self-directed learning skills

The need to develop independent learning skills has been acknowledged by students and highlighted by teachers and university tutors. However, the term 'independent learning' is problematic in itself (O'Doherty, 2006), both from the point of view of being ill-defined and its connotation of "going it alone" (Knight, 1996, p.35). We much prefer the term 'self-directed learning' since it implies active engagement and initiative by the learner without the isolation of independence. However, whichever term is used, the first requirement is for university tutors to articulate clearly what they expect of students. Once this is clear, first-year curricula require redesign to actively teach these skills.

Since students arrive at university without these skills, and they cannot be expected to absorb them by osmosis, skill development needs scaffolding to enable the transition of students from the familiar, high levels of interaction they experienced at school, towards the self-directed behaviour desired by university.

6.2 Refocus effort on Stages 1 and 2 of the Dialogic feedback cycle

- **Stage 1: Integrate students more effectively into an agreed academic community of practice through 'front loading' feedback as preparatory guidance**

Once again this requires redesign of aspects of the course, to build in time for workshops that engage students with assessment criteria and discussion of exemplars (Rust, 2003). Although Rust reported that self-assessment skills had not improved when students attended a single workshop, we would advocate the repeated application of the method throughout the year to reinforce the application of learning.

- **Stage 2: Encourage staff/student engagement with formative feedback to maximise 'feedforward': viewing feedback as a single event does not enhance the student experience**

Our research shows clear evidence that students will act on feedback on drafts at Stage 2 of the DFC, and attempt to 'close the gap' (Sadler, 1989). However, the issue of drafts is contentious, since it is highly time consuming for the tutor to mark. The 'obvious' answer seems to be peer assessment, although this needs careful introduction to overcome student opposition and potential issues of plagiarism and gaming behaviour identified earlier in the report.

6.3 Professional development for university tutors: sharing good practice

A further recommendation arises from the huge variation in formative assessment and feedback practice that we discovered among university tutors. While a number of tutors had completed PGCTLHE courses, only two identified specific guidance or training to give feedback, and that was from experience with the Open University. We strongly recommend that universities identify good practice in their local contexts and disseminate through CPD. In our opinion such staff development should incorporate the points identified in 6.1 and 6.2, in particular to enable tutors to:

- understand the prior assessment feedback experience of school students (the DFC)

- design courses to scaffold the development of self-directed learning skills
- incorporate formative feedback as in-task guidance, such as tutor/peer assessment of drafts
- incorporate activities to engage students with assessment criteria, such as use of exemplars.

The DFC could have a useful role to play in such CPD, both as a diagnostic tool for analysing current practice and as a framework in which to place context-specific feedback activities.

6.4 Further research

This research has identified a number of features of school and university assessment processes that help to explain the continuing dissatisfaction with feedback practice recorded in the NSS. The level of detail provided by the qualitative analysis has led to a model of the feedback process that could have considerable impact in the improvement of university feedback practice. While the methods used in the study are robust, we acknowledge that its range is limited as regards the type of university and the number of disciplines included in the project. Given the importance of the feedback issue, further research is needed to ascertain whether the conclusions can be extrapolated to other settings and disciplines.

This study has also highlighted the need for further research to establish effective and efficient means of assisting students to manage the transition from high dependency assessment culture of schools and colleges to the self-directed learning community within universities. In view of this we propose the need to:

- develop an assessment curriculum, based upon differentiated iterations of the Dialogic Feedback Cycle. Using a constructivist perspective the starting point will be students' prior experience of assessment in further education
- establish an evidence base for formative activities that scaffold increasing self-direction in learning by developing a student's ability to self-assess. Of particular interest is peer assessment, which appears to have significant potential (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, students in our study expressed considerable reservations about a strategy often proposed as good practice. Therefore, we consider that it is important to explore this approach in more detail and establish how it can be effectively put into practice to achieve these aims

The National Student Surveys (2005 to 2007) have consistently demonstrated that the quality of feedback is perceived to be the least satisfactory aspect of higher education today. Our study provides a cross-sector, evidence-based explanation of these results and from this informed perspective we recommend suggestions for improvement. Improving the quality of feedback by ensuring that it provides guidance and scaffolds independent learning has the potential to transform both the student experience of transition to higher education and students' approach to learning within it, providing sustainable benefits beyond graduation.

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Feedback questionnaire

Thank you for taking part in the Write Now research project investigating **assessment feedback to students**. We will use the data collected to improve the learning experience for students at participating universities.

Please take time to complete the questionnaire as openly and honestly as possible by ticking the boxes most appropriate to you. **INSERT A SYMBOL OF YOUR CHOICE** into the appropriate box for your response

Your experience of feedback before university	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In education previously, feedback was provided quickly enough to be useful.		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I usually paid close attention to feedback.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback often clearly related to the assessment criteria.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The feedback I was given did not help me reach my desired level of performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The feedback I was given for one assignment was largely irrelevant to subsequent assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I didn't understand feedback, I tried to get help from my teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When I received feedback, I used it in preparing my next assignment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found that taking notice of feedback improved my learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In my experience, feedback was frequently encouraging.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In my experience, I often received feedback from teachers on drafts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I often received feedback in enough detail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understood the assessment criteria for my assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Draft assignments that were only partially marked were of little benefit.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It was often not clear from feedback what counted as good performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your views about feedback at university					
Feedback should be provided on all assessed assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I expect I will understand the feedback I receive from my tutors.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback should be provided on examinations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would find it useful if other students commented on my drafts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I expect feedback to be provided quickly enough to be useful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would be happy to receive feedback by a checklist with no further comments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback should tell me how to improve.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would be happy to receive only written feedback.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think that the most important part of feedback is the grade.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback on assignments should be provided within 2 weeks.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would be happy with a grade and no other feedback.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would be happy to receive only oral feedback.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What do you think is most important about feedback?

Please complete the following table. Start by listing what you perceive to be the five most important characteristics of 'Ideal' feedback. Then, list five characteristics for feedback which you perceive to be 'not ideal'.

Note: For each characteristic that you put in the "ideal" column, put its opposite in the "not ideal" column.

These descriptions can be words or short phrases. Please note that they **do not have to be literal opposites** e.g. 'is encouraging' versus 'is not encouraging', but should be what you consider to be opposites (e.g. 'is encouraging' versus 'demotivating'). Please rank your 'Ideal' characteristics in order of importance to you, using numbers 1-5 (**1 = Most important, 5 = Least important**).

Rank	'Ideal' Feedback on an assignment is.....	'Not Ideal' Feedback on an assignment is...

Finally, here are some statements about assessment feedback. Please rank them in order of importance to you (**1 = most important, 6 = Least Important**).

Rank	Statement
	Students should get feedback that focuses upon what is wrong and what they can do about it, rather than on marks or the students themselves.
	Students should get enough feedback, in which the comments give enough detail.
	Students should do something different to improve their work or learning as a result of the feedback given.
	Tutors should give students feedback that they are able to understand.
	Feedback should be based upon the purpose of the assignment and how it has been marked [assessment criteria].
	Feedback should be given in time to be useful (i.e. before the next assessed assignment).
	School College University Other (specify)
Where was your last formal education prior to this course?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
What year was this?	

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