

GOLDSMITHS
University of London

ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK POLICY 2018

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1. Introduction

The current Assessment Feedback¹ Policy is a revised version of an original policy published in 2014. The essential principles contained within the original policy have been retained, but with greater emphasis placed on consistency, personalised developmental feedback, staff-student dialogue, the importance of student engagement and staff-student partnership. Below is a summary list of the main recommendations.

Assessment feedback should where possible:

- Address relevant intended learning outcomes and marking criteria;
- Be reliably recorded and retained;
- Be consistent;
- Be constructive and feed forward;
- Be personalised and developmental;
- Be timely;

The processes and procedures for feedback should:

- Be made transparent;
- Be the subject of direct staff-student dialogue.

In addition, student engagement should be actively promoted by:

- Teaching students how to interpret, reflect upon, and apply feedback;
- Inviting students to form partnerships with staff to bring about enhancements in departmental feedback practices and procedures.

The considerations and principles underpinning these recommendations are elaborated below. Specific recommendations can easily be identified as they are presented in bold bullet-pointed text: they can also be found collected together in Appendix 1 at the end of the document.

Finally, it should be noted that the term 'assessments' in this document refers to in-term activities and coursework rather than final examinations.

2. Defining assessment feedback

Rather than being solely comprised of the comments delivered by teachers to learners, assessment feedback emerges from a dynamic interactive process in which learner engagement is an essential component (Archer, 2010; Evans, 2013; Nicol, 2010). Without active student engagement, comments provided by teachers remain just that, inert comments. Teachers' comments are only transformed into feedback when students pay attention to, reflect upon, and apply potential lessons learned to future work. Thus, the following definition is proposed:

¹ The term 'assessment feedback' is used to distinguish it from feedback provided by students in the form of evaluations or surveys.

Assessment feedback is the product of a dynamic interactive process in which activities, responses or comments designed to enhance learning are provided to students who must actively engage with them in order to benefit and apply lessons learned to future work.

Since feedback emerges from an interactive process that requires active participation from both staff and students, both parties must assume certain responsibilities. The proceeding sections first address departmental and staff responsibilities, then the need for student engagement, and finally how staff and students can work in partnership to enhance feedback processes.

3. Departmental and staff responsibilities

Some form of feedback should accompany all assessed work. It is the responsibility of departments and individual staff to ensure that students are provided with high quality, consistent, constructive, personalised developmental, and timely assessment feedback.

3.1 Quality assurance

The quality assurance (QA) requirements for Higher Education (HE) programmes of study are formally specified within Programme Specification documents. Programme Specifications contain programme- and module- level Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs). It is the responsibility of teaching staff to design and provide learning and teaching activities, resources and assessments that will allow students to achieve and demonstrate specified ILOs. Effective feedback addresses ILOs by identifying and praising successful demonstrations of learning and pointing out where there are differences between ILOs and actual student performance.

There is a potential tension between the principles of QA and the process of nurturing highly creative practice. QA requires educators to stipulate ILOs well before teaching commences. However, with creative practice, there is always the possibility of the emergence of unanticipated, albeit desirable, learning outcomes. Although these should be celebrated and informally rewarded, if they are in no way captured in the originally stipulated ILOs, one cannot, part way through a course of study, suddenly move the assessment goal posts, so-to-speak, to accommodate and reward unexpected learning. Doing so would unfairly disadvantage students who have in good faith focused their efforts on achieving the originally stipulated ILOs. It is therefore important, particularly in highly creative disciplines, that staff write ILOs that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate innovative practice.

QA can also be difficult to ensure when feedback occurs in unexpected ways or contexts. Particularly with respect to practice-based teaching and learning, feedback can emerge through a dynamic conversation or interaction between teacher and student rather than conforming to a standardised teacher-led process. Nonetheless, if these more fluid forms of feedback constitute an essential and substantive constituent of the pedagogical process on assessed work, for reasons of inclusion as well as QA, reliable mechanisms should be developed and applied to capture or record the essence of these interactions.

- **Some form of feedback should accompany all assessed work.**

- **Feedback should take into account and address specified intended learning outcomes and marking criteria.**
- **Although discipline-based divergences in forms of feedback are to be expected, it is recommended that reliable mechanisms for capturing or recording all instances of substantive or essential feedback be developed.**
 - **Where possible assessed work and feedback should be recorded and retained in digital form:**
 - **Coursework that is submitted as a hard copy should have a typed general concluding or summary comments or in recorded audio form in addition to a digital scan of any comments that may have been written directly onto the work by the marker.**
 - **Coursework that is submitted and returned electronically (such as through the VLE) should be returned with typed general concluding or summary comments.**
 - **There should be ways of ensuring that the feedback is retained for future use, either by a scanned written note being kept by staff or the student(s) at or after the event, a word processed document, video or still images or that an audio recording is made of the feedback. NB: In line with regulations on data retention, this documentation should be retained for no more than three years post the graduation and unenrolment of students.**

3.2 Consistency in feedback

Although it is acknowledged that due to discipline-specific approaches there is a necessity for great variation in the context and form of feedback, one must balance this against the need for consistency. In December 2017, the Student Union hosted a very well attended Goldsmiths' Student Representatives Meeting on Assessment and Feedback. By far the strongest theme to emerge was a concern about a lack of consistency in the form, quantity and perceived quality of feedback provided to students by markers not only within, but also across departments. Although some variation is to be expected across markers, disciplines, and assessment types, great variation in the form, quantity and quality of formal feedback provided by different markers on the same or similar assessments is to be avoided. It should also be noted that inconsistencies in form and procedure across departments become a particular issue for students studying on joint degrees.

One way to address avoidable inconsistencies in feedback is for departments to discuss, agree and produce guidelines on feedback for markers. One can also increase consistency across multiple markers on the same or similar forms of assessment by the use of marking pro forma and marking rubrics.

Goldsmiths' assessment regulations stipulate that moderation and/or second marking processes need to be employed prior to the return of summative assessments. Departments can take advantage of this requirement by using the moderation process to monitor the quality and consistency of feedback provided to students. An additional benefit is that feedback to markers constitutes a potentially useful form of continuing professional development, particularly with respect to relatively junior staff such as new Lecturers, Associate Lectures or Graduate Tutors.

- **It is recommended that departments discuss, agree and produce feedback guidelines for markers, particularly where there are multiple markers on the same or similar assessments.**
- **It is also recommended that departments consider introducing marking pro forma and marking rubrics for the same or similar forms of assessment.**
- **Departments should consider putting in place mechanisms for monitoring consistency in the quality, quantity, form, delivery method and average turnaround time of feedback at module and programme level, paying particular attention to provision across departments in joint programmes.**
- **Departments should also consider, as part of any feedback monitoring system, providing feedback to markers on the quality of feedback they have provided to students.**

3.3 Constructive feedback that feeds forward

Feedback should be constructive in the sense of motivating, encouraging and supporting students to make positive advancements in their academic development. However, it is all too easy for markers to fall into the negative comments trap where they do little more than point out shortcomings in students' work. Unremittingly negative comments can be confusing and demoralising for recipients. It is not unusual for students to be awarded a high grade, but still receive nothing but negative comments. Under these circumstances, it is not unusual for students to ask, "If it is so faulty, why did I get a good mark?" Pointing out good practice and explaining why it is good can be just as important as pointing out faults. In fact, pointing out faults without providing advice on how to address them does little more than undermine the recipient's confidence.

It is important that feedback comments are specific and markers elaborate upon and explain their meaning to students. Markers should avoid providing vague, unspecified comments. For example, placing a tick in the margin of written work or writing comments such as, "I like what you did in this paragraph", without specifying what is good or why, can be confusing and frustrating for students (Murphy & Cornell, 2010).

Specific and elaborated comments can be used to 'feed forward' in the sense of suggesting what students should focus on in subsequent assessments. By feeding forward, instead of just pointing out what is right or wrong in the current piece of work, one also provides advice on how to repeat good practice and avoid or improve weaker aspects in the future. Indeed, Glover and Brown (2006) conclude that if feedback, "does not aid learning and understanding and does not feed forward, it has limited value, even if crafted carefully and provided quickly" (p. 7).

- **Feedback should not contain a preponderance of negative comments. It is also important to identify areas of strength.**
- **Feedback comments should be specific and elaborated so that lessons learned can be 'fed forward' to similar future assessments.**

3.3.1 The potential feed forward value of formative assessment

In Goldsmiths, the term ‘summative assessment’ is generally used to refer to assessment that is required and/or “counts towards” the final module grade. The term ‘formative assessment’ tends to be used to refer to assessment that does not ‘count’ and provides in that sense an opportunity for relatively risk-free feedback.² There is potentially great feed forward value in formative assessment, since it can allow students to experiment and take risks when they might be less likely to do so if the grade ‘counts’ (Yorke, 2003). However, students do not always take advantage of opportunities for formative assessment, particularly if it requires a considerable investment of time.

There are, however, many ways in which relatively frequent formative assessment can be employed without large investments of staff or student time. For example, staff can provide quizzes on learn.gold with instant written feedback on student responses. In-class quizzes, using digital response systems such Kahoot < <https://kahoot.it/>> can provide instant feedback to students and teachers alike on understanding and progress. The Formative Assessment sub-group of the Assessment and Feedback Work Stream has provided a useful resource on a variety of forms of formative assessment. This is available on [Goldsmiths Teaching and Learning](#) and on request from talic@gold.ac.uk.

- **Staff should explore ways to include various forms of engaging formative assessments as a source of ongoing feedback to students.**

3.4 Personalised developmental feedback

Even when feedback on an individual assessment feeds forward, this can be of limited use if there are different markers on subsequent assessments. A student might very well respond to feedback by making improvements in a particular area, but then receive no acknowledgement of the fact because subsequent markers are unaware of what has gone before. Such disjointed feedback erodes the effectiveness of feeding forward.

Even when the same person marks a series of related assessments, the marker may not have been instructed to refer back to previous feedback. Indeed, referring back might not always be desirable, since it is likely to slow down the marking process. In addition, if anonymous marking has been applied then it is impossible to refer back. However, without markers tracking advice from one assessment to the next, students will not receive personalised, developmentally supportive feedback.

Personalised developmental feedback can be provided via ‘feedback clinics’ in which a member of staff offers a holistic analysis of a student’s academic progress based on a review of feedback from several consecutive pieces of returned work (Murphy & Cornell, 2010). Although such meetings can be useful, they can also be prohibitively time consuming, particularly with large cohorts of students.

Another way to provide personalised developmental feedback is to feedback on work that forms the preliminary stages of a larger final summative assessment. For example, performances, long-term

² NB: These are not the widely accepted definitions for these terms. Usually, summative assessment is used in relation to evaluations of student learning at the end of a course of study (e.g., a final dissertation or exam). In contrast, formative assessment is any in-process evaluation to inform and monitor student progress, such as an in-class quiz or coursework essay marked with constructive feedback. Thus, formative is designed to aid learning, whilst summative reports on learning.

developmental project work, and artistic creation may benefit from regular oral and group/peer feedback and other forms of running feedback. The main aim is that students should receive feedback at each critical stage of the project.

- **It is recommended that departments explore ways in which they can provide personalised developmental feedback either across multiple similar assessments or at critical stages of long-term projects.**

3.5 Timeliness

A feed forward approach can inform what is meant by 'timely' feedback. Instead of absolute duration being of paramount importance, for feed forward purposes the return of work is 'timely' if there is sufficient spacing between similar or related assessments to allow students to reflect upon received feedback and feed lessons forward to subsequent assessments. If students are to plan their time so as to incorporate feedback into their subsequent work, they need to know when to expect the feedback and these dates need to be honoured as far as possible. (Naturally, this is dependent upon student submitting work on time, and attending sessions where feedback is given or received.)

Even though feed forward considerations are more important than absolute duration in the return of assessed work, student satisfaction in feedback is negatively affected if they are required to wait more than a few weeks (Murphy & Cornell, 2010; Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013). Most, although not all, universities set guidelines for the expected time from submission to the return of work. A survey of 24 UK universities revealed that six did not stipulate a turnaround period for feedback, 10 stipulated a period of within three weeks and the remaining eight stipulated within four weeks. Thus, Goldsmiths' existing recommended period of up to three, but no more than five weeks for larger assessments such as dissertations, falls within the sector norm.

The turnaround of feedback is contingent on staff workloads. Written feedback in particular requires substantial time, directly correlating to class sizes, and staff should be helped to identify periods of intense workload in relation to other activities (e.g. teaching, research, administration), to ensure that appropriate time is set aside for assessment and feedback. With expanding student numbers, departments are encouraged to consider equally pedagogically relevant and effective (in terms of meeting ILOs) alternative and varied assessments that are less time-consuming with regards to providing feedback. For example, instead of writing long formal academic essays, students could be asked to write shorter newspaper articles, to make poster presentations, to give oral presentations, write blogs or case studies, etc.

- **Dates for return of work must be published well in advance and as far as possible honoured. If an unavoidable delay occurs, such as due to staff illness, then this must be promptly communicated.**
- **Staff should review the temporal spacing between similar or related assessments to ensure that feedback is returned in such a time as to allow students to reflect upon and apply lessons learned from one assessment to the next.**
- **Feedback should be provided on or before a specified date that is ideally up to three weeks from the stipulated submission deadline for work handed in on time, but no more**

than five weeks (excluding weekends, public holidays and days of College closure).

- **The precise turnaround time will be dependent on the length, size and/or complexity of the work; its timing in relation to similar future assessments; if the work is to be moderated or double-marked; and the Framework for Higher Education Qualification level of the work.**
- **Departments should work with staff to identify periods of intense workload, taking into account other activities (e.g. teaching, research, administration), to ensure that appropriate time is set aside for assessment and feedback.**
- **Departments are encouraged to consider pedagogically relevant and effective (in terms of meeting intended learning outcomes) alternative and varied assessments that allow quicker turnaround times.**

4. Student engagement with feedback

For feedback to be effective, it is reliant on the proactive or “agentic” engagement of students (Winstone et al., 2018). As Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling (2005) put it, “if information is simply stored in memory and never used, it is not feedback” (p. 381). In line with this, Nicol (2010) argues that, “While the quality of the comments is important, the quality of the students’ interaction with those comments is equally, perhaps more, important” (p. 503). Yet, it has been found that students often do not know how to engage effectively with feedback (Robinson et al., 2013). It is important, therefore, that staff not only provide high quality feedback, but also discuss and even actively teach students how to use it.

Students often do not effectively engage with feedback if they fail to understand fully the assessment requirements and marking criteria (Nicol, 2010). At a minimum, each type of assessment should have associated ILOs and marking criteria that are easily accessible to students (i.e., on the VLE, in handbooks and/or attached to assessment instructions). Yet, it is best practice to discuss assessment instructions, ILOs, and marking criteria directly with students well before assessment deadlines. For more on the importance of staff-student dialogue on assessment and feedback see section 4.1 below.

- **ILOs and marking criteria for assessments and the mechanisms for feedback delivery should be made easily available (e.g., attached to assessment instructions or briefs, posted on the VLE, and/or contained within Handbooks) and discussed with students at an early stage, well before assessment deadlines.**

4.1 The importance of staff-student dialogue

Although necessary, it is well established that sole reliance on articulating assessment requirements and marking criteria in written form is not sufficient to improve student performance (Nicol, 2010; Norton, 1990; Rust, Price and O’Donovan, 2003). In contrast, Rust et al. (2003) found that in an intervention that involved providing a combination of written versions, verbal explication by staff with the opportunity for staff-student dialogue (i.e., discussing assignment briefs and marking criteria), the use of exemplars, and in particular marking practice (i.e., where students were given the opportunity to mark exemplar work) did prove effective.

Another way to teach the skills needed for agentic engagement is through providing opportunities for peer feedback. Allowing students to comment upon their peers' practice, performance or work encourages them to reflect upon the processes and principles underlying assessment and feedback. Peer feedback should be handled carefully so that students are coached to provide balanced, respectful and constructive comments. Nonetheless, most researchers agree that giving students the opportunity to provide feedback to their peers can be highly effective in encouraging a more reflective approach to assessment (Moore & Teather, 2013).

Not only is it recommended that staff explicitly discuss ILOs, assessment requirements and marking criteria with students, they should also consider discussing the principles guiding the processes and forms of feedback. Such a discussion may be vitally important with respect to uncovering and addressing unrealistic expectations held by students. For instance, some students believe that the more feedback they receive the better, commending high volumes of in-text comments and long general written summary comments. However, Brown, Glover, Freake, and Stevens (2005) found in an analysis of Open University written feedback, "that a high quantity of feedback does not necessarily imply that the feedback is of high value" (p. 7). Indeed, a high volume of feedback can overwhelm students and make it difficult for them to identify which elements they should focus on for future learning (e.g., Glover & Brown, 2006).

It is important to engage in open staff-student dialogue about feedback early in a student's programme of study. Upon conducting a survey of sixth form students, Jones et al. (2009) found they held many misconceptions with respect to the feedback they expected to receive upon transition from school to university. For example, the majority of school pupils reported often or always receiving personal verbal feedback along with comments on drafts or preliminary stages of work prior to final submission and expected to receive the same at university. When first year students from four universities were given a presentation within the first two weeks of starting university about what to expect with respect to feedback, a later questionnaire revealed that they had more realistic expectations and were more satisfied with their feedback than second year students who had not seen the presentation (*ibid*).

An open staff-student dialogue about feedback can help students realise that there are many forms of feedback that they may not have even recognised as such. For example, students may not be aware that relatively informal discussions with staff and peers about their ideas and work constitute feedback. In the context of open dialogue, staff can offer guidance to students on how to best to recognise and utilise different forms of feedback. Forms of "non-obvious" feedback include peer assessment, Q&A sessions in lectures, quizzes (on-line and in class), non-assessed debates/discussion during group work, responses to forum posts - to list but a few.

- **Staff should seek ways to encourage and teach students effective approaches for identifying, reflecting upon, proactively engaging with and utilising all forms of feedback.**
- **Staff are encouraged to consider, where appropriate, developing opportunities for peer- and self-assessment or reflection.**
- **Departments should strive, as far as possible within the dictates of assessment regulations, to achieve transparency in assessment and feedback processes. Procedures and criteria for marking, double marking, moderation and the role of external examiners should be made clear and available both in written form and through face-to-face staff-**

student dialogue.³

- **Openly discussing the guiding principles and procedures associated with feedback early in a student’s programme of study can help ameliorate any unrealistic expectations.**

5. Staff-student partnerships for feedback enhancement

A recent statement about the soon to be released updated Quality Code, indicates that one of its guiding principles will be engaging, “students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience” (UKSCQA, 2018). This closely echoes Goldsmiths’ Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) 2017-2021 which states:

“We aim to ensure that all students are supported to engage in every aspect of Goldsmiths’ learning, teaching and assessment... We will do this by... [w]orking in partnership with students to bring about enhancements in Goldsmiths’ learning practices.”

If departments wish to plan ways of enhancing their feedback procedures and practice, it is highly recommended that they work in partnership with students. Indeed, two UCL departments, Philosophy and Anthropology, report achieving great improvements in student satisfaction in assessment and feedback by working in close partnership with students to bring about enhancement in their practices and procedures (Garaway, 2018; How a UCL, 2018).

- **It is recommended that departments explore means by which to work in partnership with students to bring about enhancement in feedback practices and procedures.**

³ NB: The above recommendation aligns closely to Chapter B3 of the Quality Code (2013a) which stipulates the following indicator of good practice, “Every student is enabled to monitor their progress and further their academic development through the provision of regular opportunities to reflect on feedback and engage in dialogue with staff “ (QAA, 2013a p. 21).

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 - The precise turnaround time will be dependent on the length, size and/or complexity of the work; its timing in relation to similar future assessments; if the work is to be moderated or double-marked; and the Framework for Higher Education Qualification level of the work.
- Departments should work with staff to identify periods of intense workload, taking into account other activities (e.g. teaching, research, administration), to ensure that appropriate time is set aside for assessment and feedback.
- Departments are encouraged to consider pedagogically relevant and effective (in terms of meeting intended learning outcomes) alternative and varied assessments that allow quicker turnaround times.
- Staff should seek ways to encourage and teach students effective approaches for identifying, reflecting upon, proactively engaging with and utilising all forms of feedback.
- Staff are encouraged to consider, where appropriate, developing opportunities for peer- and self-assessment or reflection.
- Departments should strive, as far as possible within the dictates of assessment regulations, to achieve transparency in assessment and feedback processes. Procedures and criteria for marking, double marking, moderation and the role of external examiners should be made clear and available both in written form and through face-to-face staff-student dialogue.
- Openly discussing the guiding principles and procedures associated with feedback early in a student's programme of study can help ameliorate any unrealistic expectations.
- It is recommended that departments explore means by which to work in partnership with students to bring about enhancement in feedback practices and procedures.