



Making assessment feedback effective in higher education: A review of literature

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Abstract

Assessments and feedback are interrelated and play a vital role for students, educators, and institutions. However, giving feedback can be daunting for educators and receiving feedback can be unsatisfactory for students, diminishing the effectiveness of further improvement of students' learning. This research reviews recent literature from 2017 onwards to identify students' and educators' challenges in assessing their perceptions and experiences of the feedback process. Additionally, it reviews the literature about what feedback means and the features that make feedback effective. This research proposes five key areas, namely: (i) content; (ii) tone and language; (iii) feedback literacy, (iv) educator training; and (v) assessment design and marking guidelines, for educators and their institutions to improve the feedback process, thereby improving the learning experiences of students.

Keywords: Assessment feedback; feedback; lecturers' perceptions; students' perceptions.

Introduction

Assessments have become a key element of students' learning to determine their achievements, providing positive and/or negative impacts on students learning. Feedback on assessments plays an important role in improving students' learning, as it assists students to focus their decisions on how to improve (Henderson et al., 2019) and assists students in addressing intellectual challenges and cognitive development, resulting in success (Cohen & Singh, 2020). According to Meiras (2021), feedback is a process of dialogue with multiple inputs such as peer reviews, and it works best in a collaborative environment. However, with the rise of asynchronous learning environments, giving and receiving feedback has become challenging and the effectiveness of feedback depends on the quality of learner-content interaction and learner-teacher interaction (Fabriz et al., 2021).

Whether it is a synchronised or asynchronised learning environment, assessment feedback may have a limited impact on students' learning when assessments are graded, and educators use feedback to justify the mark (Rawlusyk, 2018). It can also be argued that feedback has little or no impact when students are solely focused on the mark. The adverse impacts of feedback can be attributed to whether students use the feedback they receive for improving future learning. Lancaster et al. (2020) found that students who receive a higher grade in their assessments use feedback for further improvements in subsequent assessments, compared to students who received a lower grade for their assessments. Comparatively, assessments without grades attached may have less impact on students' learning because of students' resulting in lack of motivation and effort (Broadbent et al., 2018).

In contrast, the research argues that inefficiencies in feedback arise. For example, Cohen and Singh (2020) argue that the effectiveness of feedback given by educators depends on its quality and reception by students, so that gaps between the expected level and actual level are filled and students understand why and how they can fill gaps. Inefficient feedback limits students' engagement with the feedback and opportunities for future improvement (Winstone et al., 2017). Meanwhile, educators face difficulties in writing feedback for every student due to time constraints and students' unique characteristics (Selvaraj & Azman, 2020). Evaluating students' work and providing feedback based on educators' evaluation is one of the most difficult and complex tasks for educators but the constructive feedback is one of the most powerful encouragements for students and their learning (Brookfield, 2015). These findings imply that both educators and students face challenges when giving and receiving feedback, which can result in less effective and more difficult assessment feedback processes.

To improve the effectiveness of the assessment feedback process, it is important to improve the giving of feedback to enhance students' experiences in receiving it. This research, therefore, aims to review literature identifying: (i) students' perceptions of feedback and why students face difficulties when interpreting assessors' feedback for future improvements; (ii) educators' perceptions of assessment

feedback and its challenges; (iii) what feedback means and key properties or areas to enhance the effectiveness of the feedback process; and (iv) potential changes to assist educators and their institutions that could have a positive impact on students' learning.

Methodology

This methodology section discusses the inclusion criteria for research papers in the present study. A systematic database search for research about assessment feedback in higher education was conducted to identify relevant research papers. Three databases – EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Emerald – were searched for publications. Google Scholar and ResearchGate searches and an internet search were also performed to ensure that relevant studies were not missed. Starting with broad keywords such as “assessment feedback”, “effective feedback”, and “feedback in higher education”, a literature search was carried out, limited to articles in English. Research within research articles was also conducted to identify relevant papers. The analysis of the literature considered the most recent papers, published from 2017 onwards. Overall, 27 studies were included in the review.

Perceptions and experiences

Students' perceptions and experiences of receiving feedback

This section of the review examines students' perceptions and experiences of assessment feedback, highlighting the prime importance of educators and institutions altering how feedback is provided and also assisting students to better use feedback to implement improvements. Although students appreciate educators' effort and time in giving feedback on their work, they report that they are not receiving the feedback they expected, identifying: (i) strengths and weaknesses in their work; (ii) similar mistakes that can be avoided in subsequent assessments to improve performance; and with (iii) a tone of encouragement.

The literature shows that students expect educators to comment on their performance to justify marks and/or grades, and pinpoint errors and improvements for the future (Deeley et al., 2019). While students believe feedback should enable them to identify strengths and weaknesses in their work (Deeley et al., 2019; Dawson et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2019), they want educators to outline any weaknesses with a positive tone of encouragement, as negative feedback demotivates them (Deeley et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2019). Importantly, Henderson et al. (2019) and Cohen and Singh (2020) observed that positive comments motivate students, thus inclining them to read the remaining feedback and comments. It is worth noting that positive comments and praise for students with lower marks could also demotivate and decrease students' trust in educators' marking and feedback.

In relation to seeking further clarifications, Deeley et al. (2019) discovered that students believe some educators feel that they are being challenged by students about their expertise if further feedback and/or clarification is sought because negative and harsh comments are provided. In contrast, they also found that some other students felt that the best feedback occurred when there was an opportunity for discussion with the educator. These findings reveal that the method of delivering feedback significantly impacts its effectiveness.

However, Pitt and Norton (2017) argue that students' reactions to feedback depend mainly on their predetermined expectation of their grade, and they are more likely to react emotionally, resulting in either appreciation and gratitude towards the feedback or ignoring it. Supporting that these are emotional reactions, Lancaster et al. (2020) found that students who received a higher grade for their assessments used the feedback for further improvements in their subsequent work. However, Lancaster et al. (2020) also stated that further research is required to investigate the impact of emotional reactions on students' perceptions and use of feedback. Results from a survey conducted by Hill et al. (2021) found that some students felt angry and frustrated when receiving insufficiently supportive feedback and harsh comments, resulting in a lack of motivation in future assessments. Additionally, Hill et al. (2021) suggested educators should use non-judgemental language and a positive tone to comment on aspects of students' work, along with clear measures for further improvement.

The main barrier preventing students from acting on received feedback to improve their subsequent assessments is difficulty in interpreting it and identifying how mistakes could have been avoided. From a survey of students, Nash and Winstone (2017) found that students prefer more specific feedback, explaining improvements they should make in future assessments, to avoid similar mistakes. Gravett and Winstone (2019) discovered that the use of academic jargon, not having enough guidance on applying feedback, and ambiguity in comments created comprehension difficulties and left students feeling that feedback was not useful. Students also believe that outlining errors in feedback does not assist in developing and improving their subsequent assessments (Cohen & Singh, 2020). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of feedback depends on students' interpretations. In order to assess students' interpretations of written comments and the effectiveness of feedback, Ginsburg et al. (2020) used two sets of words and phrases commonly appearing on feedback and asked seventeen very experienced educators from four institutions to define the meaning of each word or phrase. The respondents found that it was challenging to interpret and understand the meaning of a single word or phrase without context, which supports students' comments about lack of feedback or feedback with limited context and not understanding the meaning of educators' comments and implementation of feedback for improvement in future learning.

To summarise, the key themes arising from the literature review regarding students' perceptions and experiences of feedback are that improving its content and quality with an encouraging tone and language enhances its usefulness for

future improvement.

Educators' perceptions and experiences of giving feedback

The present research then reviews the literature on educators' perspectives on feedback and the difficulties faced when providing feedback. From a survey of educators, Cohen and Singh (2020) found that educators believe that they are highly skilled and capable of giving feedback to students which closes the gap between students' actual level and the expected level. However, the same research found that educators admitted that students feel feedback is inadequate if it is generic. It is worth noting that when students receive generic feedback, the usefulness of the feedback is decreased, making it less likely to be acted on in future.

Similarly, Mulliner and Tucker (2017) found that educators believe their feedback is detailed, fair, and specific to the areas that students should improve. It is worth noting that educators believe that the quality of the feedback depends on the educator. This can be linked to potential inconsistencies in feedback practices. Smith and Lowe (2021) stated that, although educators believe that they justify grades, make improvements to avoid repetition of similar mistakes, and assist by providing improvements for future assessments, it is likely that educators do not construct the feedback appropriately to improve the trajectory of results in future assessments. This can be linked to the findings of Henderson et al. (2019), who argue that it may be difficult for educators to determine whether students understand their feedback and use it to improve future assessments.

However, evidence from a discussion of responsibility-sharing in the context of assessment feedback shows that educators' view of the barriers preventing students from using feedback were lack of motivation, enthusiasm, and effort in seeking feedback for improvements (Nash & Winstone 2017). This same research also noted that some other educators believe students' main focus is their mark or grade, but not the feedback itself. As mentioned before, Nash and Winstone (2017) found that students blame educators for not providing specific feedback for improvements, so they recommend shared responsibility of both students and educators. While students need to spend more time and effort on feedback, educators need to invest more time in ensuring feedback can be applied in other subjects in the future (Nash & Winstone, 2017). However, the same research acknowledges that educators face difficulties when giving future-oriented feedback. Although some educators noted the importance of giving individual feedback and their desire to do so, they expressed the challenges they face due to time constraints (Hicks et al., 2019).

In contrast, some educators claim that they are highly skilled and capable of providing feedback, but that students require effort and time to best use feedback. However, Norton et al. (2019) found evidence that educators acknowledged lack of experience in following marking criteria and guides when providing feedback, and thus recommended formal training on the assessment marking process for educators. These findings align with those of Henderson et al. (2019)

that some educators, especially sessional staff, may lack education or training on marking and providing feedback. A review of literature by Chowdhury (2019) found that some research argued that rubrics are a useful tool, but they limit educators' judgements of students' work because those who regularly use rubrics could assume that if something is not mentioned in the rubric, it may not be important.

In summary, in this review of educators' perceptions and the challenges of the feedback process, the key themes identified are students' awareness and use of feedback, educators' awareness of feedback practices and professional training, as well as feedback and assessment design and marking guidelines.

What is feedback?

This section reviews various definitions and key features of feedback discussed in the recent literature. While both educators and students acknowledge that feedback should assist students in improving, there are various definitions of feedback discussed in the literature, identifying features such as an action plan with directions and guidance on how students can improve (Watling & Ginsburg, 2019) and an explanation of students' strengths and weaknesses and ways to improve and value students' effort by providing strategies and direction for future developments while allowing performance to be tracked (Zhang & Zheng, 2018). Shafi et al. (2018) noted five key elements of effective feedback: (i) recognition of the student's effort and achievement; (ii) justification of the grade, (iii) reference to the assessment; (iv) integration of improvements into the response; and (v) clear suggestions for future improvements. They also argued that students should take responsibility for their work instead of finding excuses for their shortcomings. However, it is an educator's responsibility to make feedback effective and constructive and to provide clear and correct feedback to students explaining mistakes and how to avoid them in future.

To improve the learning experience of students, Bartkowiak-Théron, McShane and Knight (2020) suggest that educators should consider innovative, transparent and reliable feedback, building the trust between students and educators. Henderson et al. (2019) stated that giving feedback is a complex process and identified twelve conditions for feedback to be effective, under three key themes – capacity for feedback, design for feedback, and culture for feedback. It is worth noting that their research also suggests that a culture for effective feedback needs to be developed within the institution, moving away from the typical focus of 'best practice' of giving feedback towards designing 'enabling' feedback.

A review of this research suggests educators and their institutions should consider a feedback approach which 'enables' students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the submitted work and to improve future work.

Suggestions for enhancing the feedback process

A review of the literature reveals that both students and educators acknowledge that feedback should be given in a way that enables students to learn from their mistakes and improve in future assessments. However, the review shows that a mismatch of perceptions and experience of feedback between these two groups contributes to the deteriorating effectiveness of feedback. Important factors that contribute to inefficiencies in feedback include: (i) content; (ii) tone and language; (iii) feedback literacy; (iv) staff training; and (v) assessment design and marking guidelines. Therefore, this section evaluates literature identifying ways to reduce the gap between perceptions and experience of students and educators regarding assessment feedback.

(i) Content

The content of feedback should enable students to identify their weaknesses and strengths, and to use different methods to avoid mistakes and improve future work (Shafi et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2018). The content of feedback should also link to the assessment criteria and be actionable (Haughney et al., 2020). A well-defined marking rubric is a great tool for students to understand the expectations of an assessment and allows educators to judge students' work accurately, provide useful comments on strengths and weaknesses, and suggest improvements (Chowdhury, 2019).

(ii) Tone and language

Tone and language play a critical role in the effectiveness of feedback. Educators should provide feedback that encourages students (Dawson et al., 2018) and enables students to receive messages clearly and apply the suggestions (Haughney et al., 2020). It is also worth noting that a personalised and encouraging tone in feedback makes students feel that it addresses them personally.

A survey of learning developers conducted by Gravett and Winstone (2019) identified where language became a barrier for students to comprehend feedback, especially the use of academic jargon, complex terminology, acronyms, and careless writing with grammar or spelling mistakes. Importantly, these findings suggest that educators should use an encouraging tone and simpler language to convey the message clearly and accurately.

(iii) Feedback literacy

Feedback literacy refers to students' ability to understand and process information received to improve their learning (Carless & Boud, 2018). Carless and Boud (2018) proposed four key features that underpin feedback literacy: 'appreciation of feedback'; 'ability to make the judgement'; 'managing affect'; and 'taking action to use feedback'. Educators have a significant impact in assisting students to develop feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018; Hill et al., 2021). Improvements in students' feedback literacy lead to long-term learning benefits for students (Carless 2018;

Carless & Boud, 2018), including enhanced motivation, use of productive strategies, and active reflection on feedback for learning and continuous improvement. Meiras (2021) also stated that feedback literacy is a key aspect of the development of students' motivation and engagement.

(iv) Educators' training

Educators play a major role in the feedback process as their judgements of students' work against marking criteria allow constructive feedback to be provided to students to improve their learning. To provide constructive feedback, educators require expertise, formal training, and sustained feedback from their colleagues about the use of feedback (Norton et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2019; Selvaraj & Azman, 2020) which enables them to accurately assess students' work against the marking criteria.

(v) Assessment design and marking guidelines

Clearly designed and connected assessment tasks increase the effectiveness of feedback (Henderson et al., 2019). For positive long-term learning benefits to students, educators, and their institutions, the design of curricula and assessments should be constructed in such a way that students are able to apply the feedback in subsequent assessments, enabling them to make informed judgements about their work (Carless, 2018). As noted earlier, a well-designed marking rubric assists students by communicating requirements and outlining strengths and weaknesses in their work, while also assisting educators to make accurate assessments of students and mark their work consistently (Chowdhury, 2019). Notably, educators require clearly stated mark allocations and instructions to make their rubric more effective.

Conclusion

Assessment feedback plays an important role in students' learning. This review of the literature identified that students expect feedback to outline mistakes, strengths, and weaknesses in their work, and how these could have been avoided. However, students found that sometimes feedback was insufficient for them to understand all or most of it and improve in future. Educators believe they are capable of giving enough feedback for students to know their mistakes and improve in forthcoming assessments, and they claim that some students make insufficient effort to use feedback for improvement. This paper also reviewed literature that identify what feedback means in higher education and the features of effective feedback.

The present study proposes five key areas that educators and their institutions should consider enhancing to increase the effectiveness of feedback and thus assist students in improving their learning: (i) content; (ii) tone and language; (iii) feedback literacy; (iv) staff training; and (v) assessment design and marking guidelines. Further investigation is required by educators and their institutions as to the nature of changes in their practices that 'enable' students to use

feedback to make an impact. Finally, as Henderson et al. (2019) stated, “feedback is a complex process” but changes to enable students to use feedback and see improvements in their learning are beneficial not only for students, educators, and institutions, but also for the wider community.

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