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From Feedback to Feed-Forward: Please Come to the Big Brother Diary Room...

**Dr Bela Arora
Associate Director
Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
University of Wales, Newport
Allt-yr yn Campus
Allt-yr-yn Avenue
Newport
NP20 5DA**

Email: Bela.Arora@newport.ac.uk

ABSTRACT Feedback on formative and summative assessment has been highlighted as an area of concern by the QAA and the National Student Survey (NSS) in recent years. In particular, the NSS has driven university policy-makers into a state of panic about how best to remedy this seeming crisis in provision. This paper suggests that feedback has been constructed as a universal crisis and that the response by certain universities is disproportionate to the challenge of enhancement in this area. The author presents the tentative findings of a study in which a Big Brother Diary Room was created to garner the views of students on feedback. The emerging picture is one of inconsistency rather than crisis.

Introduction

Feedback has been widely recognised to be a central learning tool in education, nevertheless it still appears to be a somewhat under-researched area in higher education, in comparison to broader studies on assessment. Nevertheless, this is slowly changing and many universities now regard feedback as an area of priority, in part due to pressures emanating from the QAA and the National Students Survey (NSS). One could argue that higher education has entered an age of discontent, in terms of feedback on assessed work and to some extent this has been fuelled by a consumer culture in the student population in addition to an element of moral panic. There are certain indicators within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that suggest growing concerns related to assessment processes, such as figures on verification and appeals, but it seems as though there is a swell of lower level discontent amongst students at department and more so at module level regarding feedback on assessed work. The true extent of the swell is as yet undetermined. Nonetheless, it is certainly not as simplistic as to say that the students want more feedback, which unfortunately seems to shape current staff meeting debates.

The study presented in this paper suggests that students are looking for improvements at a very basic level in addition to the inevitable requests for more feedback. Many participants voiced frustrations but this by no means a universal sentiment in the sample. The quality, utility, timeliness and legibility of feedback were all cited as being problematic. However, it is also worth noting that the participants in the study were both sympathetic to the pressures of providing extensive feedback in the face of growing cohort sizes and also extremely constructive in their recommendations for change. The overall aim of the study was to conduct a pilot investigation into students' perceptions of feedback and use the footage as stimulus for discussion in staff development sessions as well as for reflection. The visible emotions in students' responses and their articulation and voicing of frustrations provided a powerful, high impact, audio-visual tool for contemplation and for developing personal strategies for change.

Given the dearth of focus group discussions and the bombardment of questionnaires to students in HEIs, the study reported in this paper used the methodology of a Big Brother Diary Room to bring to light students' perceptions of feedback. In addition to using the results of the study to inform staff development, the Big Brother Diary Room project also aimed to offer an additional source of data to inform policy and subsequent practice. However, it is important to question whether the current obsession with feedback in some HEIs is in fact misplaced. There is certainly a degree of 'evidence' that suggests there is widespread student discontent with feedback, however, one can argue that this may in part be

because the wrong questions are being asked of students or, more notably, that we are problematising feedback on assessed work, thus creating a perpetual and self-reinforcing cycle of criticism. In the course of this paper, the author will offer a brief overview of the contextual debates followed by a discussion relating to the study and tentative results.

Contextual Overview

The NSS has, undoubtedly, succeeded in framing itself as the dominant window on the state of higher education provision in terms of feedback on assessed work, but one can argue that the underpinnings of the survey itself are somewhat problematic. At a base level terms such as feedback and promptness, which appear in the survey question set, can be deemed subjective and open to interpretation. Professor Lee Harvey, a former Director of the Higher Education Academy, took criticism further and famously commented in the Times Higher Education Supplement that he regarded the NSS as being ‘shallow, costly, widely manipulated and methodologically worthless’ (THES, 12 June 2008). The NSS asks respondents to rate their satisfaction with the quality of their course, the teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources and personal development. Clearly, there are obvious issues about how a student measures and quantifies their experience and what they are measuring their experience against but there are further questions that need to be raised about how the experience is translated and used as data in comparative tables.

It is also worth recognising that there do seem to be cycles of discontent around particular issues. Less than a decade ago, library resources were the target of student discontent, however, that is now a category that appears to be a strength in comparison to feedback on assessed work. A cursory examination of the NSS scores for Politics at University of Bristol, Cardiff University and University of Warwick revealed that the latter two institutions achieved scores of 76% and 77% respectively in response to the statement ‘The library resources and services are good enough for my needs’. Only 20% of respondents from the University of Bristol agreed to the statement, which was considerably below the Russell Group average (<http://www.unistats.co.uk/nStudentSurvey.do>). Debates on feedback suggest that it is an area in crisis, but there is little meaningful evidence, reflected in a variety of different sources to suggest that the situation is as dire across the board as is being reported.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that the NSS as one body of data, does paint a damaging and disturbing picture of the quality of meaningful feedback in the sector. A simple comparison of data across the three Russell Group Institutions provides an illuminating and somewhat typical snapshot of students’ perceptions of feedback on assessed work. The table below, extracted from the most recent NSS data, highlights the perception of Politics students at university in Bristol, Cardiff and Warwick, in relation to the feedback they receive on assessed work.

Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	<u>Agree</u>	<u>No.respondents</u>
UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL: Politics	<u>49%</u>	52 of 89
CARDIFF UNIVERSITY (PRIFYSGOL	<u>54%</u>	66 of 118

CAERDYDD): Politics		
UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK: Politics	59%	128 of 229

Source: <http://www.unistats.co.uk/nStudentSurvey.do> accessed 10/03/2010

In isolation the figures present a damning indictment on the extent to which students are finding the feedback to be helpful in improving their understanding of relevant issues. There appears to be great cause for concern, however, it is difficult to determine the impact of the non-respondents as they may form a body of students with no complaint to voice. Closer examination of wider data suggests that there is broad consensus among students that detailed comments *are* regularly being provided on assessed work, however, they do not necessarily find that the guidance is providing clarity. It is interesting and encouraging to note that a comparison of the NSS data suggests that there is a high level of overall satisfaction across the three institutions despite low ratings on feedback.

One cannot deny the centrality of feedback in the learning process and it is easy to construct pockets of academic staff as simply not recognising the value of feedback in contributing to the students' development or being resistant to pressures of quality enhancement in teaching practice because they consider themselves to be first and foremost researchers. However, there are ultimately considerable pressures on time that make it a challenge to devote a significant amount of time to the provision of feedback. The situation is further accentuated when one considers the vast differences in teaching and administrative workloads in some cases. Time constraints and the spread of teaching workloads at final year level can have a sizeable impact on the subsequent NSS results and this is a dimension that is commonly marginalised in university management debates. Irons (2008:26) argues that

It is recognised that significant effort is required in the design of effective formative assessment activities and the production of quality formative feedback. Hence, there is a need for commitment, engagement and 'buy in' from all those concerned, i.e. management, academic staff, administrative support and, perhaps most importantly, students.

While debates about feedback to students have risen sharply to prominence in recent years, there has been recognition of the importance of feedback for a number of years. Discussions range from the merits of a variety of forms of feedback and the impact of feedback on student development, through to debates relating to ways in which students can react to feedback and their ability to feed forward and apply learning to future assessments. MacDonald (1991:3) defined feedback as a process of assessing 'a student's strengths and weaknesses, and suggests directions for improvement'. It is of concern that nearly ten years on, the study presented in this paper reveals that it is still commonplace for feedback to focus on the strengths and weaknesses rather than offer any direction for improvement. Furthermore, a proportion of the literature reinforces this narrow approach to feedback.

Despite, the debates about feedback to students becoming more visible, there still appear to be a diversity of views on the fundamentals of what feedback is supposed to achieve. For example, Brown (2007:34) argues that 'for feedback to be meaningful and useful, it should in some way help to fill the void between what was desired and what was achieved'. However, one could argue that this view compounds the position that feedback relates to comments on one piece of work in a vacuum, rather than a healthier approach of constructing feedback around the gap between what was desired and what was achieved, and then using this as a

springboard to identify how the feedback can be carried forward. This highlights the difference between seeing feedback as a result and seeing it as part of a process.

A dimension of the literature that has gained considerable currency relates to evaluations of the way in which students engage with feedback. Ovando (1994) identifies the link between student engagement with feedback and students' learning performance. She argues that constructive feedback has the potential to encourage the student to engage in a process of reflection and evaluation. The value of reflection being a part of the learning process is also a position articulated by Kolb (1982). More recently, Rust (2002) has suggested that the centrality of the learner and the learner's ability to engage with feedback is representative of a shift in focus from teaching to learning. The prominence of social constructivist thinking in pedagogical debates reinforces the increasingly common perspective of the student being active in engaging with the learning process. Van Den Boom et al (2004) and Thorpe (2000) also adopt positions that focus on students' ability to reflect upon feedback to enhance their learning. Unfortunately, the shift in focus in the literature is not necessarily mirrored in the debates on feedback at institutional level. Institutional debates tend to focus on the processes of assessment and feedback and can leave little room for deeper and more complex engagement with issues such as how a student 'experiences' feedback. A focus on timeliness and legibility as well as more challenging debates regarding minimum threshold standards for feedback on assessed work, can all be addressed centrally, however, past studies, in addition to the study presented in this paper highlight that there are areas such as the feedback experience that also need greater attention

Welcome to the Big Brother Diary Room

The study presented in this paper, admittedly, had a limited scope as it was intended to be a pilot for broader research. However, it was an attempt to firstly test the feasibility of the Big Brother Diary Room as a methodology and secondly to garner students views on feedback on assessed work and identify specific issues for later interrogation. Therefore, the conclusions drawn are tentative and represent a starting point for further investigation, elaboration and focus. The study, nevertheless, highlighted areas of misunderstanding and misperception of terms that are commonplace in higher education, such as student centred learning.

The participants in the study were asked the follow questions:

What is your understanding of feedback?

In what way do you find the feedback on your coursework to be constructive, encouraging and helpful?

In what way do you feel that the verbal or written feedback that you have received reflects accurately the mark that you may have achieved in your coursework?

In what way do you feel that the feedback you receive gives a clear indication of what you would need to do to improve your performance, for example a better mark or grade?

In what way do you think that an assessment which is marked and returned, but does not contribute towards your module mark is beneficial to your learning and why?

What, for you, are the key features that make good feedback? (provide examples)

What, for you, are the key features that make bad feedback? (provide examples)

Do you use feedback to help your learning? If so, in what ways?

Which is more important to you: the grade or comments and why?

Are there particular areas of feedback that you would like to see improved?

Students in the sample were predominantly, but not exclusively, drawn from the first year cohort and the study intended to identify whether the views offered in the Diary Room were

consistent in any way with the final year students, who were generally responding in the NSS that they regarded feedback on their work to be poor. The students in the sample were drawing to the end of their first year of study at the university and therefore will have experienced a full cycle of assessment and feedback. Upon entering the Diary Room, the participants' first question interrogated their understanding of the meaning of feedback. A number of participants simply stated that they did not know what feedback was, as they had not received any. One student commented 'I don't have a big understanding of feedback, as we don't get much of it'. Another said, 'Feedback on coursework is minimal'. It was not clear, however, whether the respondents were generally not receiving feedback or whether it was a case that they were receiving feedback, but not in a form that they recognised. Other participants in the study saw a clear link between feedback and their learning development.

Many participants in the sample were vociferous that the feedback they were receiving did not always help them feed forward. They made reference to the fact that they were not able to apply the feedback to assessments that followed, but it was encouraging to learn that they were aware of the value of feedback. The study highlighted that students placed great value on feedback. The study showed that students had a sophisticated awareness of the purpose of assessment and recognised that assessment can be *of* learning as well as *for* learning. More importantly, a significant proportion of the sample had a mature understanding of how feedback can be carried forward. The National Union of Students campaign in 2009, which encouraged students to place a sticker on essay submission coversheets stating 'Feedback helps me learn', may have contributed to a raised awareness in the student body of the value of meaningful feedback.

The participants in the study found that the option of one-to-one discussion with their lecturer was invaluable. In cases where students had been provided with that opportunity, they commented that it helped them gain a better understanding and grasp of key issues with the chance to clarify areas of feedback that they did not initially understand. One respondent commented that 'Having a one-to-one meeting with my tutor also helped me see where I can improve and what I need to do to get a higher mark'. Another participant also said, 'General feedback is helpful but then one-to-one is always key to understanding specifically where you can improve and it gives you a clearer understanding of what you need to do'. Participants who had experienced a more personal approach to feedback offered no suggestions for improvements in feedback and felt that they were given sufficient guidance and clarity on the steps they need to take to improve their performance in future pieces of assessed work. They all agreed that they found the feedback to be constructive, encouraging and helpful. One participant, who was having one-to-one verbal feedback across modules in addition to the written feedback, commented that 'I find the feedback I get to be helpful and it helps me plan for future essays'. This is clearly a contrast to the dominant discourse of crisis in the quality and quantity of feedback on assessed work. Laurillard (2002) argues that feedback must relate to the student at an individual and personal level, which takes into account their personality, aspirations and expectations. Indeed, even though most academics would share the view that one-to-one feedback would be the ideal, there still remains the challenge of how this can be achieved in the face of ever increasing class sizes, where modules with 200 students or more have become the norm. The Big Brother Diary Room study did, however, show that despite value being placed on a personalised approach to feedback as an ideal, a significant proportion of the sample were aware of the difficulties of providing such a level of 'service' when cohorts are extremely large.

Participants were surprisingly rather sympathetic to the workloads of lecturing staff and recognised that in modules with large cohorts it can be difficult for the lecturer to give personalised feedback. A number of participants advocated group feedback during a lecture. There is a tendency for some academic staff to assume that students get only a limited benefit from group feedback, however, participants suggested that this was an effective and welcome feedback tool. One participant said 'I like it when the tutor gives general feedback to the whole class in lectures, so that you can get an understanding of what everyone has done wrong and you don't just feel like it's you that makes all the mistakes'. The participant's comment suggests that the students are not simply seeing general feedback in class to be a mere tool of efficiency, which may be the perception of some academic staff. Rather group feedback as a tool may in fact be positively influencing how the students receive, interpret and later reflect upon feedback. Ivanic (2000) stressed that if students do not understand the feedback they are given, their reaction can often be a deeply personal one and a sense of failing as an individual rather than reflection on their work. This is accentuated by the fact that students may have a tendency to subconsciously inflect a critical tone on written feedback that they receive. Young (2000) has taken this area of research further by suggesting that students who may have low self-esteem may even react negatively to positive written comments as they may interpret positive comments as preceding deflating negative comments. In an analysis of comments made by the participants in the study, it emerged that there may be need for wider support in the first year in particular, in the assessment process. One participant said 'Some people, even when they work their hardest...I've actually seen people crying after they write their essays because they have worked so hard and they get all these criticisms...it's like they are criticisms but what can I actually do?'. This view highlighted the lack of confidence that some students may have and therefore the importance of providing a balanced appraisal of a student's work with a clear indication of how to improve, feed forward and develop. One participant, who had experienced inconsistency in the quality and utility of feedback commented 'I think they should always highlight good things about your work as well otherwise it can knock your confidence and you will think 'oh I'm rubbish at this' and not even try in the next one I do'.

In the case of this study, the participant's comments highlight that the student can feel deflated and discouraged by written comments that fail to indicate how the student can improve, particularly when there is no room for discussion and clarification. The feeling of being part of a collective in the feedback process can leave the student feeling less isolated and the result may be that the student becomes more inclined to engage with their peers in sharing strategies and addressing common challenges. In this sense, providing group feedback can have a range of unseen benefits that influence the group's shared learning experience and transform the dynamic of how students would otherwise receive, personalise and react to feedback on assessed work.

Simply being given the opportunity for a brief dialogue in a group can help clarify areas that may not initially seem ambiguous to the essay marker. There are terms that are commonly used in feedback that participants in the study found difficult to comprehend or did not understand how to address. For example it is common for students, in their first year in particular, to receive comments relating to the structure, or lack of structure, in their essays. A participant commented that 'if you got the structure wrong you need to know how to sort that out. Need to teach students how to organise or structure their work'. Generally, this was an area of frustration for participants. A number of participants in the study felt that the quantity of feedback was not an obstacle to their learning but they often did not understand terms that many academics were using without questioning. Paukert et al (2002) argued that

students are often given comments such as ‘be more evaluative’ without being told how to actually achieve this. It seems ironic that a vast amount of energy is being invested in improving the timeliness of feedback to students, which is no doubt a critical area, but many students seem to be asking for rather basic and fundamental improvements such as greater explanation and direction in the feedback that they are currently receiving. Again, this reinforces the challenge that whilst the sectoral focus on the provision of feedback is healthy, there may also need to be closer attention to the way in which feedback is currently being ‘received’ by students. Lea and Street’s (2000) study examined students’ interpretation of feedback and suggested that students and academic staff have different assumptions about what constitutes subject knowledge and this can in turn determine how students interpret feedback comments on essays. Wider research has been conducted on how students ‘receive’ or react to feedback, including studies by Hyland (1998, 2003), Ivanic et al (2000), Taras (2003) and Mutch (2003). There is generally consensus that there can emerge a chasm between the lecturer’s evaluation of a piece of assessed work and the student’s interpretation of the written comments and that this can potentially impact upon the student’s self esteem.

Many institutions are grappling with the question of whether students are currently being over-assessed. This has to some extent been driven by an increase in concerns about over-assessment being raised by external examiners. Unfortunately, such comments rarely distinguish between formative and summative assessment, which then results in formative assessments commonly being the first casualties. The situation becomes more complex when you consider that there are no clear and uncontested definitions of formative and summative assessment. Yorke (2003) makes reference to the ‘definitional fuzziness’ in part because the spectrum of tasks often categorised as being formative can be so vast. However, one can propose that summative assessment is related to a ‘judgment’ whereas formative assessment tends to refer to a developmental tool. Gibbs (2005) argues that detailed feedback is often more closely aligned to formative feedback but it is in fact equally relevant for summative assessments. The results of the study suggest that over-assessment may not so much be a concern of the students. The majority of participants in the study provided an extremely positive response to the question ‘In what way do you think that an assessment which is marked and returned, but does not contribute towards your module mark is beneficial to your learning and why?’. One participant commented that ‘I don’t think it’s that beneficial if it doesn’t contribute to your overall mark’, however, the majority of participants saw this as a valuable tool and it was described as being a ‘dry run’ by one respondent. Comments also included:

It gives you good practice for your exams. It gives you an idea during the year if you need to be working harder for exams.

It helps because as a piece of work it’s less pressure. You can understand where you went wrong without it affecting your module mark.

It can be beneficial as there is often a technique to answering a question so having regular assessed work that doesn’t contribute to your overall mark will help you improve those skills. But there is less incentive or drive to do your best in the piece of work.

I think this is really beneficial. We don’t have this in our department but I think that’s a really good way of improving your actual mark when it is official, because then you have had the chance to practice and you’re more confident when it comes to actually doing the proper thing, and it’s kind of like you have mastered it.

The opportunity to develop through practice in a safe context was highly valued by the participants. It was encouraging to observe that they had a sophisticated understanding of assessments being part of a learning process rather than simply a judgement. This calls into question the somewhat oversimplified debates that can take place in policy circles relating to over-assessment. Knight (2001:5) interestingly emphasised that formative assessment is also a low-stake developmental tool for the academic as well as for the student. He noted 'with formative assessment the stakes are not so high - no-one's future rides on the accuracy of advice about continuing to improve your work'. Irons (2008:20) suggest that formative assessment can encourage the student to

- Think about what it is they are trying to learn;
- Try things out and learn from mistakes;
- Think about what it is they want to learn;
- Discuss subjects they don't understand;
- Take into account the possibility of different interpretation of the formative assessment activities; and
- Consider and reflect on their learning needs.

A number of participants in the study additionally, and voluntarily, offered their essays in way of corroborating the views they had shared in the Diary Room. A significant proportion of the essays had no comments on the coversheet and in some cases did not even have the minimalist tick boxes completed. In many cases there was only a numerical grade on the coversheet of first year essays and one participant in the study said 'when you just get a mark, it doesn't mean anything'. Another participant commented that there was red underlining on parts of the essay, but the student was not clear what exactly this represented, given that there was no explanation alongside. Underlining sentences on the scripts emerged as a common area of concern for participants across a number of modules. One student said 'Some tutors just underline things and don't actually write anything on the essay'. Ivanic et al (2000) highlighted the sense of deflation that students can often feel when they are only given a grade without any additional comments on areas of weakness in the essay and how the areas could be improved upon. Participants' comments included:

In order to get a better picture or a deeper understanding you have to go and find the tutor and ask them personally - it's generally not encouraging at all. Especially with my essays, I find it really disheartening and I don't really know where I stand or how I can get a first.

It varies across my module, but one piece of work I got back was just a number and it didn't have any feedback at all. It just provided me with a grade. That was really difficult for me as it's an area that will be tested in the exam. I feel that it doesn't give you any indication of where you went wrong. I could repeat the same mistakes in the exam and get a low grade because the feedback wasn't there to help me understand more about the subject.

Feedback provides the student with an opportunity to adjust their approach to assessment and in cases where the student is given no guidance, this can curb their learning development. Connellan (2003) sets out three types of feedback: positive, negative and extinction. Positive feedback is defined as being reinforcing, negative is defined as being punishing and extinction is related to cases where no feedback is offered at all. Connellan argues that no feedback is in fact as damaging as negative feedback. This view is also highlighted in a study conducted by Goleman (1998) which examined a cohort of MBA students and the effects of

feedback. Poignantly, the study revealed that those who received no feedback suffered the same loss of self-confidence as those who were simply criticised. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for first year students to receive only a grade on a script and in part this may be because first year marks rarely contribute to the degree and therefore it is not always perceived as a priority in the academic workload. Clearly, greater investment in feedback during the first year, may in fact reap dividends for the academic and student in subsequent years.

Concluding Remarks

The study presented in this paper highlights that there is unquestionable room for improvement in the provision of feedback, however, it is of equal importance to highlight that there was also satisfaction reported by a number of the participants. The most 'satisfied' participants were the students who had the opportunity to engage with feedback in either a one-to-one setting or a general feedback session with the entire cohort. There are certainly areas of feedback to students that can be enhanced, however, this may be addressed more usefully at local or module level. The elevation of feedback to the level of a university challenge, or even sectoral challenge, that requires a university strategy may, arguably, be a disproportionate response to an issue that has simply been constructed as being universal. The QAA, NSS, NUS and the media have raised the profile of debates about feedback to students on assessed work to the extent that it has promoted a false consensus that in turn is driving universities to address the issue at an institutional level, and in some cases in a more regulated and prescriptive way.

Literature on pedagogy may not be a seamless fit with literature on moral panic, however, one can nevertheless draw some constructive links. The roots of academic discussion on moral panic began to emerge in the 1960s, however, was developed more fully by Cohen in 1972, with an underpinning in sociology and cultural studies. Moral panic, as developed by Cohen, had resonance with literature on deviance, delinquency and youth culture but has since evolved and been adopted by a wider range of disciplines. Cohen (2002: xxii) outlines that the original definition of moral panic highlights a spectrum of the following components:

- (i) *Concern* (rather than fear) about the potential or imagined threat;
- (ii) *Hostility* – moral outrage towards the actors (folk devils) who embody the problem and agencies (naive social workers, spin-doctored politicians) who are 'ultimately' responsible (and may become folk devils themselves);
- (iii) *Consensus* – a widespread agreement that the threat exists, is serious and that 'something should be done'. The majority of elite and influential groups, especially the mass media, should share this consensus.
- (iv) *Disproportionality*: an exaggeration of the number or strength of cases, in terms of the damage caused, moral offensiveness, potential risk if ignored. Public concern is not directly proportionate to objective harm.
- (v) *Volatility* – the panic erupts and dissipates suddenly without warning.

If one considers universities to be a microcosm of society, these elements are both familiar and applicable to the debate on feedback. Concerns have, certainly, been raised and reported about the quality of feedback, particularly by the QAA, who consider their main aim to be the safeguarding of quality standards in higher education. The QAA Code of Practice on Assessment of Students (2006: 20) states that institutions should provide and timely feedback appropriate feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement but does not increase the burden of assessment', however, failings in this area have been continually highlighted. In May 2009, the QAA published its final report on *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher*

education in England, and again the quality of feedback to students was cited as an area in need of attention. The QAA's spotlight on feedback has been reinforced by successive years of poor scores relating to specific, not all, dimensions of feedback provision, as collated in the NSS and widely publicised in the media. As a result, a consensus seems to be developing and policy-makers in many universities are in agreement that 'something should be done' and that it should be at a university-wide level. Students themselves are becoming increasingly aware of the so-called consensus and one can argue that this in turn is shaping their responses to questions of feedback. For example, a first year participant in the study commented, 'feedback just seems to be a big problem at universities, well ours at least'. This suggests that feedback has been problematised in the public domain to the extent that it will be difficult to change preconceptions of current provision.

It is important to note that the consensus is only apparent at certain levels within university structures. At a localised departmental level, the response is far more mixed and fragmented. Moreover, a proportion of academic staff appear to take an extremely defensive stance. This division between those who feel targeted and those (students) who are raising the concerns has to some extent inadvertently become more entrenched as a result of certain NUS approaches. For example, as part of their 2009 campaign, the NUS developed an alternative feedback form for students to attach to their assessments. This was certainly met with pockets of predictable hostility. Other NUS strategies have, admittedly, been met with less hostility. Nevertheless, one could argue that the university-wide approach is disproportionate given the lack of widespread research about how endemic the seeming crisis in feedback actually is. Concerns may, indeed, be fully justified and, clearly, disagreeing with the students views would be seen as dismissive. However, in light of the fact that a number of universities are considering imposing minimum threshold standards on feedback in an attempt to improve NSS scores, the author would suggest that the development of strategies appear to be preceding more in-depth research about the extent of the challenge and the degree to which this has impacted upon wider quality standards.

The study confirmed that there are certainly areas in the provision of feedback that can be improved upon, however, this should not detract from the fact that a number of participants had a mature understanding of feedback and were satisfied with the guidance that they were being given. More specifically, the participants who were given the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the marker found great benefit. Contrary to expectation, the participants found general feedback sessions to the cohort to be as valuable as one-to-one feedback. Clearly, one-to-one discussion was considered to be the most valued form of engagement, but general feedback sessions were highly rated. The participants made suggestions for improvements in the feedback process, however, in many cases their recommendations were more conservative than one would expect. Many of the participants simply wanted greater clarification about terms that are common in academic discourse that may relate to structure for example. Unfortunately, many of the participants were experiencing considerable inconsistency in the provision of feedback across their degree programmes and this is arguably at the root of the discontent. The responses suggest that there are still pockets of academic staff who provide no written feedback on essays and simply note a grade on the coversheet. This is clearly unhelpful and can be argued to be damaging to the students' learning development. However, in light of the inconsistency in practice highlighted by this study, particular concerns should be noted regarding the disproportionality in response to the challenge. Ultimately, feedback on assessed work is constructed as being an area in crisis and in some cases this is being used as a justification by university policy makers for more draconian and prescriptive regulation in the guise of minimum threshold standards.

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