Perfect Assessment and Feedback in Psychology: Students' Perspectives

Martyn Quigley* and Emma Whitt**
*Swansea University. **University of Nottingham

Abstract

Assessment and feedback constitute crucial components of the pedagogic process within higher education. However, students report dissatisfaction with these processes and fail to engage with the feedback they receive. This study therefore sought to explore what students consider to be 'perfect' assessment and feedback using the criteria outlined in the United Kingdom's National Student Survey (NSS). Two focus groups were conducted with psychology undergraduate students and thematic analysis was performed. The first focus group explored what students considered to be perfect feedback. Six themes emerged: *clear and accessible criteria, consistent and objective marking, specific and general feedback, positivity and recognition, examples and practise;* and *support and guidance*. Notably, a clear desire from students emerged for a greater use of examples throughout the assessment and feedback process. The second focus group explored how students engaged with feedback they have received and factors influencing their engagement. Four themes emerged: *attend or avoid*; *similarity and recency*; *logistical difficulties*; and *checkpoints or checklist.* Whilst there was variation in how students perceived and engaged with feedback, there was general consensus on how to facilitate engagement and improve feedback.

Keywords
Feedback preferences; feedback engagement; students' perspective.

Introduction

Assessment and feedback are crucial components of the pedagogic process. The distinction between these two processes is often blurred, however, they each serve unique purposes (Winstone and Boud, 2020). Assessment provides an opportunity to measure and evaluate student understanding whilst supporting learner progression (e.g. Boud and Falchicov, 2006). Feedback contains information that enables a student to understand their performance on an assessment and identify ways in which to improve (Irons, 2007). The importance of these distinct processes is reflected in key higher education metrics which often categorise the two together. For instance, the United Kingdom's (UK) National Student Survey (NSS) collects data from final year students regarding their satisfaction with their course and identifies assessment and feedback as one of its key criteria. This is important as the NSS results influence a university's ranking in UK university league tables. Other countries also employ similar student surveys at a national level including Australia, Canada, Netherlands and the USA (Winstone et al., 2022).

Despite the centrality of these processes in higher education, however, students report dissatisfaction with them within the UK and internationally (Careless, 2006; Deeley et al., 2019). Indeed, the UK's NSS has consistently revealed that students report lower satisfaction regarding the clarity, fairness, usefulness and timeliness of assessment and feedback, relative to other aspects of their course (e.g., teaching on their course) and the same is true internationally (e.g. Australia; Winstone et al., 2022). This trend has remained consistent across annual versions of the UK's NSS and has been independently verified with large scale surveys (e.g. Ferguson, 2011; Weaver, 2006). As such, many studies have been performed to establish effective assessment and feedback practices (Bailey and Garner, 2010; Evans, 2013), and key feedback theories and models have been developed (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2015; Winstone and Carless, 2020).

Citation

Students' Assessment and Feedback Perceptions and Preferences

Paterson et al. (2020) conducted a systematic analysis to explore students' needs and preferences for feedback across a range of subjects. Thirty-six articles were selected for inclusion from a range of disciplines including psychology, nursing and food sciences. The analysis revealed several key points relating to students' feedback preferences. These were: the balance of positive (e.g. praise) and negative (e.g., critical) feedback; the clarity of feedback; the timeliness of feedback; direct and specific feedback (e.g., feedback focusing on certain sections of the work); justification of the mark awarded; and the applicability of feedback for future assessment. The authors also reported that students preferred to discuss feedback face-to-face (i.e., multimodal feedback) and noted the emotional impact feedback can have on students. The above findings are of importance as they shed light on students' perspectives of feedback across a range of disciplines, which has been relatively underexplored. Indeed, Paterson et al. (2020) note there is a need for more research exploring the needs and preferences for feedback from the student perspective.

The current study addresses some of these concerns by investigating psychology students' perceptions of assessment and feedback in the context of the criteria (e.g., clarity, helpfulness) outlined in the NSS. As noted, this aspect of the NSS is typically one of the lowest scoring and often results in institutional interventions to enhance these practices. However, for interventions to be effective, as measured by the NSS, a clear understanding of students' assessment and feedback perceptions and preferences in the context of the NSS criteria is essential. The current study therefore employed a semi-structured focus group with psychology students which centred on the questions outlined in the NSS prior to 2023. These questions are:

- The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
- Marking and assessment has been fair
- Feedback on my work has been timely
- I have received helpful comments on my work

Whilst the NSS questions have been slightly amended in the 2023 iteration of the NSS they are conceptually similar to the previous set of NSS questions and address the same themes (i.e. the clarity, fairness, timeliness and usefulness of feedback).

Students' Engagement with Feedback

The present research also sought to explore how students engage with feedback once they have received it. There is widespread agreement in the literature that feedback is only effective if it is understood and used by the student (Price et al., 2010). However, disconcertingly, evidence suggests that students fail to access and engage with their feedback. For instance, Sinclair and Cleland (2007) noted that 46% of medical students in their study did not collect formative feedback, whilst other studies have found that students fail to act upon the feedback they receive (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005). Winstone et al. (2017) explored some of the issues which prevent students from engaging with feedback using focus groups. Thematic analysis revealed a range of issues, including student difficulty in understanding feedback and a lack of student motivation to act upon feedback, thus shedding some light on the obstacles preventing effective engagement with feedback. However, Mulliner and Tucker (2017) note that further qualitative research is needed to explore how students engage with feedback. Thus, the current study also sought to also explore what students do with the feedback they receive and how they use feedback using an additional semi-structured focus group.

Subject and Institutional Information

The present study took place within a School of Psychology in a UK university.
Psychology is one of the most popular degree programs to study in the UK (Rasheed, 2020). The NSS results for assessment and feedback for psychology across the UK were 74% at the time the study was

conducted. At an institutional level, the School of Psychology's results (when the current research was conducted) were 65% for assessment and feedback. The results for each question were as follows:

- The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance [65%],
- Marking and assessment has been fair [62%],
- Feedback on my work has been timely [80%]
- I have received helpful comments on my work[52%].

Assessment in the respective School of Psychology consisted of essays, exams, lab reports and presentations. Essay and lab reports are marked using marking rubrics and feedback comments are provided containing information on what students did well and how they could further improve. Feedback is provided within three working weeks of submission.

Method Participants
Seventeen undergraduate psychology students (all females) were recruited from the School of Psychology, with students in their first (n = 7) or second year (n = 10). The focus group exploring students' perceptions and preferences for assessment and feedback consisted of 9 participants (7 first years and 2 second years) with participants age ranging from 18-21 years old (M = 19.00; SD = 1.00). The focus group exploring students' engagement with assessment feedback consisted of 8 participants in their second year, participants ranged from 19 to 22 years old (M = 20.13; SD = .99). A target sample size of 8-10 was selected for each focus group to ensure that each group was of a sufficient size to capture a range of perspectives but was not too large that it became unwieldy for the moderator (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Participants received a £10 inconvenience allowance. Ethical approval was received from the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

Procedure and Materials
After participants agreed to take part, they were required to provide demographic details (e.g. age, gender and year of study). Each focus group was conducted in a semi structured format and lasted no longer than 90 minutes to ensure participants were not overwhelmed with questions or mentally fatigued (Nyumba et al., 2018). Each focus group was conducted by a moderator and a note taker was also present. To facilitate conversation and to aid rapport building (see Colucci, 2007; Winstone, Nash, Rowntree and Parker, 2017), each focus group started with a group activity.

Focus Group 1: Students' Assessment and Feedback Perceptions and Preferences
The focus group began with an assessment activity referred to as the 'The Biscuit game' (Brown, n.d.). This game was devised with the primary aim of highlighting the complexity inherent in assessment. The version employed in this study required participants to consider what they deemed to be the perfect biscuit and to then determine the biscuit which most closely matched the criteria out of a range of biscuits presented to them. The focus group was then conducted in a semi-structured format with the key questions mapping onto the areas of assessment and feedback included in the NSS. These included whether the marking criteria had been made clear to them, the fairness of assessment criteria, the timeliness of feedback on assessments and whether they have received helpful comments on their work. Follow up questions were asked which focused on the types of feedback they found particularly useful, what could be done to ensure the feedback they receive is most useful to them and how they felt the feedback process could be improved.

Focus Group 2: Students' Engagement with Feedback
Participants first took part in a variant of a feedback activity devised by Winstone et al. (2017). In this activity participants were required to read short descriptions of 10 interventions to facilitate students' engagement of feedback (e.g. developing an assessment portfolio, discussing feedback). Participants

were then required to determine amongst themselves a rank order of these interventions from most useful to least useful. As in Winstone et al. (2017) the activity was provided to stimulate conversation in relation to assessment feedback. The focus group was then conducted in a semi-structured format with the pre-selected questions focusing on what students do with feedback when they have received it, whether they engage with it at subsequent time points and if there were any barriers preventing them from using their feedback.

Data Analysis
Focus groups were recorded using a Dictaphone and were then transcribed.
Transcriptions were subject to thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive realist approach with themes identified at a semantic level. To ensure the themes were valid both authors analysed the codes and themes independently and any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results and Discussion
Focus Group 1: Students' Assessment and Feedback Perceptions and Preferences
Six main themes were identified following discussion of students' perceptions and preferences of assessment and feedback in the context of the NSS criteria, these were:

1. Clear and accessible criteria
2. Consistent and objective marking
3. Specific and general feedback
4. Positivity and recognition
5. Examples and practise
6. Support and guidance

These themes provide the basis for subsequent discussion.

Clarity and Accessibility
During the focus group it became apparent that the clarity and accessibility of assessment criteria is important to students to aid their understanding of what is expected of them. It was noted that assessment criteria need to be made clear and accessible in advance of an assessment, and afterward, so that they can see what they need to work towards and how to improve. One participant stated:

> Thanks to the grid [marking rubric]... we can just check the specific box and be like okay did we do that and see how we could improve.

Thus, highlighting the importance of assignment feedback directly relating to the assessment criteria so they can see its relevance. Another student also noted that clear and accessible criteria provide reassurance that they are on the right track:

> It's always accessible as well… so you can constantly check back as you're working towards an exam.

The weighting of assessment criteria (i.e. being able to see how much different sections or skills contribute toward the marking criteria) was also noted as being key.

Consistency and Objectivity
Concerns over marker consistency and objectivity in relation to the assessment criteria was a reoccurring theme. One student noted:

Different tutors [markers] pick up on different things. Like, I noticed when you've compared your essay to your friend who has a different tutor or whatever and you've not done the same thing... one tutor has commented on it and another hasn't.

Similar comments arose regarding the amount of feedback. For example, it was noted that:

[it's] quite subjective as to the tutor you have [and] as to how much feedback you get. Like, I have some friends who literally have one comment at the end, and they have like literally nothing the whole way through, and then I have other friends who literally like, nearly every paragraph they got something to work on. So, it's kind of like, again the whole luck thing as to what situation you're in, like I wish it was a bit more consistency [sic] across the areas.

Specificity and Generality
The value of specific feedback (i.e., feedback focusing on specific sections of the work) was clearly noted by students. One student noted that:

What I really like, for example, is when they say in one paragraph this is what you have done right so you know... but they also say if you would have included that and that it would have been even better, so that they tell you *specific* comments about what you wrote.

This point was supported by other students, with one student noting that they found specific feedback where certain sections were highlighted more helpful in clarifying how to improve. Despite a clear preference for specific feedback though students could also see the value of general feedback (i.e. commenting on the key aspects of the work) in relation to assessment criteria. For instance, one student noted that feedback which is too specific in focus on subject content may have limited utility for subsequent assessments.

Positivity and Recognition
Throughout the focus group it was clear that recognition of the positives in students work was just as important as addressing the weaker areas, to ensure they know what to continue doing and to be able to see where marks were gained. For instance, one student noted that:

It is just [as] important to say what you have done right as to say what you have done wrong because you could just carry that onto the next essay.

The power of positive reinforcement and a constructive tone was also clearly expressed, with one student noting:

I love getting positive feedback. I feel like you can't underestimate someone saying like well done, because obviously like if you haven't got a 0 out of 100, then you did something right.

Additionally, recognition of their progress from one assessment to another was noted as being reinforcing.

Examples and Practise
A resounding and relatively novel message from students was the need for examples of previously completed assessments and to have opportunities to practise assessments. All participants expressed a desire for examples of completed assessments to elucidate exactly what is required according to the assessment criteria (this was arguably the most salient theme). For instance, it was noted that:

It would help to… look up someone else's work and go okay that's what that means by comprehensive use of… like to actually be able to see what they mean by that.

It was also noted that it is difficult to know how to improve without being provided with an explicit example of what they should be working toward. One student commented:

If I keep getting it wrong it is because I don't know how to change it, so I feel like if they gave examples then yeah, I would be able to use it.

The possibility for opportunities to practise (i.e. formative assessments) was also cited as being desirable, particularly in the early stages of studying or when encountering new forms for assignments.

Support and Guidance
Support and guidance from personal tutors and markers were also noted as being important as it ensured that students had the opportunity to ask questions about their performance. Students noted that individual in person contact was preferable. For instance, one student noted that:

Because we have gone from lots of us getting good grades from psychology at A-level and everything, coming in and getting quite a low mark on the first essay, I cried my eyes out and it would have been nice to… have someone to talk to on a personal level – and then say actually 'this is normal, this is fine'.

Focus Group 2: Students' Engagement with Feedback
Four main themes were identified following discussion of what students do with feedback once they have received it and how they go about using the feedback they receive, these were:

1. Attend or avoid;
2. Similarity and recency;
3. Logistical difficulties; and
4. Checkpoints or checklist.

These themes provide the basis for subsequent discussion.

Attend or Avoid
Two different strategies in terms of how students engaged with the feedback they received became apparent during the focus group. Some participants mentioned that they were more inclined to avoid feedback if the result for the work was lower than they expected. One student noted:

I feel like if it's a bad grade, I think ok let's move onto the next one and then I don't really look at it again.

Alternatively, other students noted a lower-than-expected grade resulted in enhanced engagement with feedback. For example, one student stated that:

Usually when its bad I'm more focused [than] when its good.

Despite two clearly different approaches in how students engaged with their feedback, it was clear the discrepancy between the grade they received and what they considered to be a good grade influenced their engagement with feedback.

Similarity and Recency

The similarity of previous assessments also appeared to be a factor which influenced whether students engaged with previous assessment feedback. If a current assessment appeared similar to a prior assessment, students were more likely to return to and attempt to address the feedback they received on the previous assessment. One student noted:

> I read it [the assessment feedback].. then [I] kind of forget about it until I come to write the next thing that's similar to that.. I'll get it up and be like ok so I need to focus on improving this.

Another student stated that:

> If I'm writing an essay, I'll use the [feedback on previous] essays if I'm writing a lab report I would use lab reports.

However, the extent to which feedback on previous assessments was used appeared to be limited to the most recent feedback for one student:

> I don't think I use all of them, I think I just use the last one.

Logistical Difficulties

A key reason offered as to why engagement with previous assessment feedback was limited in some instances, appeared to stem from logistical difficulties in accessing feedback. Some students noted that they found it difficult trying to synthesise feedback from multiple assessments due to difficulties in viewing feedback from multiple assignments simultaneously. One student noted that:

> If you download them [assessments] it's a bit easier but then you've still got to have like 10 different windows open and scroll to the bottom of 8 or 9 pages to get to the feedback.

Another student noted:

> I find it very inconvenient to do that, I sort of end up with lots of tabs and stuff, so I end up just not doing it and only using the last one.

To overcome this, students noted that better accessibility to previous feedback within their virtual learning environment would be desirable.

Checkpoint or Checklist

There were notable differences in the manner and time point at which students engaged with previous assessment feedback. Some students noted they used feedback on a previous assessment in a checklist like manner when approaching completion of a subsequent assessment. One student stated that:

> I would just like usually only look at the feedback after I'm done writing my next report.

Another student noted that:

> I would use it at the end just to double check that I've put everything in and like I haven't put extra stuff that's not necessary in.

Other students noted, however, that they used previous assessment feedback at various checkpoints throughout the completion of subsequent work. For instance, one student stated that ideally:

It's helpful if I open up [previous feedback] at the beginning.

Notably, students who reported engaging with feedback at an early stage found the idea of looking at previous assessment feedback only once they had completed their next assessment as 'stressful'.

General Discussion

Two semi-structured focus groups were conducted with psychology students. The first focus group explored psychology students' preferences and perceptions of assessment and feedback in relation to the NSS criteria. The second focus group explored how students engaged with the feedback they received.

Students' Assessment and Feedback Perceptions and Preferences
The results from the first focus group revealed six main themes:

1. Clear and accessible criteria
2. Consistent and objective marking
3. Specific and general feedback
4. Positivity and recognition
5. Examples and practise
6. Support and guidance.

These themes are consistent with the themes identified in the systematic analysis on students' preferences for feedback by Paterson et al. (2020). These authors noted that the key themes relating to optimal feedback from a student perspective were: the balance of positive and negative feedback; the clarity of feedback; direct and specific feedback; and justification of the mark awarded, which is conceptually similar to the consistent and objective marking theme in our study. Surprisingly, the timeliness of feedback did not appear to be an issue of concern within this study which is at odds with previous literature (i.e. Brown, 2014; Paterson et al., 2020; Williams and Kane, 2009). However, this could be accounted for by the fact that within the institution the research took place feedback is routinely released on time within a timeframe that is communicated to students.

The similarity in themes between the current study and existing literature is reassuring as it demonstrates a conceptual replication of previous findings regarding students' perception of assessment and feedback (e.g., Mulliner and Tucker, 2017; Paterson et al., 2020; Weaver, 2006). However, it also ensures that the findings of previous studies align with the topics students note as important when considering the assessment and feedback criteria the NSS employs. This is important as it suggests that efforts to improve assessment and feedback practices, based on student perceptions and preferences from the existing literature, should (in principle) result in enhanced student satisfaction with assessment and feedback as measured by the NSS.

One resoundingly clear and novel theme within the first focus group where there appeared to be room for improvement though was the need for examples and opportunities to practise. This is something which students explicitly desired and thought would add most value to their assessment and feedback experience. This should not be surprising as being provided with examples of what is required of someone when completing any task is a key feature of successful learning (Atkinson et al., 2000; Bandura, 1977; Sweller, 2004) and students regularly report finding exemplars useful (To et al., 2022). Yet, this has perhaps not received the same attention as other aspects of the assessment and feedback process (e.g., timeliness). It could be argued that this theme has previously been captured under other themes of previous studies (e.g. clarity of feedback and feedforward), however, the clear desire for examples across different stages of the assessment and feedback process in this study warrants

attention being placed on examples and practise as a unique theme of importance. Notably, there was a desire for examples of work which matches different grades of the marking criteria before and after the marking process, examples of what explicitly students need to do to improve when receiving feedback comments, along with examples of how to do this and opportunities to practise and improve.

This is certainly something which could be addressed and in some cases is common practice (i.e. providing examples of work from each grade bracket). However, one of the issues raised by students was that this tended to happen prior to submission of an assessment or perhaps early during a degree program, but not when feedback was provided which would help contextualise the information they received and elucidate how to improve. One way to address this is to provide examples of what students can do to improve their work within feedback comments or to provide examples of assessments to aspire to after marks have been released for an assessment. Both approaches have challenges though. For instance, providing examples in the feedback given to each student can be time consuming, whilst sharing of examples of high-quality assessments after marks has been released can be difficult to achieve in a timely manner due to logistical issues such as obtaining permission from students, and waiting for confirmation of the grades from exam boards. The modularisation of information pertaining to assessments can also prevent students from engaging with assessments once they have completed the module (Hughes et al., 2015). A third suggestion is to use examples after the students have written a draft of their work followed by peer or self assessment (To et al.,2022). This may address the students' comments about contextualising information with feedback that relates to the marking criteria and avoids the logistical and motivational issues mentioned previously.

Students' Engagement with Feedback
The results from the second focus group exploring what students do with feedback once they have received it and how they go about using the feedback they receive, revealed four main themes:

1. Attend or avoid
2. Similarity and recency
3. Logistical difficulties
4. Checkpoints or checklist

These themes provide some key insights into what students do with the feedback they receive. Notably, there was considerable variability in how students engage with feedback dependent on the grade received. Some students noted they were more inclined to engage with feedback if the grade was lower than expected, whereas other students were more inclined to avoid the feedback comments they received in this instance. The mediating variable(s) which accounts for these differential strategies in engaging with feedback warrants further investigation. Engaging with assessment feedback may be taxing from an emotional perspective (Ryan and Henderson, 2018; Shields, 2015), however, choosing to ignore feedback in such instances is counter-intuitive and likely to result in the same grade being obtained again. These differential approaches could be due to individual differences in personality traits. Previous research has demonstrated that academic attainment and engagement is positively correlated with conscientiousness (Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham, 2003; Quigley et al., 2022). Perhaps conscientiousness also plays a role in moderating students' likelihood of engaging with feedback.

The similarity and recency of feedback was also a key factor which influenced feedback engagement, with feedback from the most recent and similar assessment being most likely to be used. The tendency could be indicative of the modularisation of assessment and feedback (Hughes et al., 2015). However, it is also clear that logistical issues associated with viewing and retrieving feedback impacted

on feedback engagement, with students noting they found it difficult to view feedback from multiple assessments simultaneously in the virtual learning environment where the feedback is presented. These results are consistent with Winstone et al. (2020). These authors examined the barriers associated with student engagement with feedback in learning management systems. The authors noted several potential issues that impact on student engagement with feedback including the spatial distribution of feedback and grades, and the difficulty of collating and applying feedback from different assessments when the feedback location is distributed. However, they also noted that opportunities can be provided within these systems to facilitate the process of engaging with assessment and feedback such as a feedback portfolio (see Winstone et al., 2017).

The opportunities afforded by learning management systems to facilitate feedback engagement is something which students themselves identified in the current study. For instance, students noted that changes could be made to their virtual learning environment to ensure previous feedback was easily accessible whilst completing subsequent assessments.

Some students noted that it would be ideal to have a 'tab' or space within their learning environment where all their previous feedback was stored, whilst other students requested that there be a reminder link to previous feedback on the submission portal for an assessment to ensure they checked previous feedback prior to submitting their work. These are features that would be worth implementing and would help support student engagement with feedback. In the current study students noted that they engaged with feedback at differing points, with some students reporting they revisited previous feedback when commencing a subsequent assessment, whilst some students revisited previous assessment feedback after they had completed a subsequent assessment and were due to submit the assessment. Ensuring previous feedback was easily accessible at all stages would hopefully encourage greater engagement with feedback.

There are some limitations to the current study though that need to be considered including the small-scale nature of the study and the non-generalisable sample. It is therefore unclear whether the same themes would emerge if we recruited male students, final year (or PG) students, or students studying different disciplines to psychology. That said, we do anticipate that similar findings would emerge (regardless of degree program) given the relevance of the themes identified here to all forms of assessment and feedback within HE. However, future research using both quantitative and qualitative methods could empirically examine the generality of the themes that emerged from this study with larger and more diverse samples, including those studying a range of degree programs and those from different educational backgrounds.

In conclusion, the current study explored psychology students' perceptions of, and engagement with, assessment and feedback. The central findings relating to students' perceptions of assessment and feedback were consistent with existing literature (e.g., Mulliner and Tucker, 2017; Paterson et al., 2020; Weaver, 2006). However, notably students desired greater use of examples throughout the assessment and feedback process. With regards to students' engagement with feedback, it was clear there was variability in how and when students engaged with feedback. Factors which influenced this process included the accessibility of feedback and the perceived usefulness of the feedback. These findings have clear practical implications for practitioners in HE. Critically, based on the current findings, teaching staff should seek to provide examples of good practice (e.g., student exemplars) at all stages of the assessment process and ensure that feedback – with clear utility – is easily accessible to students when they are working on subsequent assessments. Future research should seek to examine whether the same criteria constitute perfect assessment and feedback with larger more diverse samples from a range of degree programs.

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