



QAA
Scotland

FOCUS ON: FEEDBACK FROM ASSESSMENT

What does Student-Led Teaching Award nomination data tell us about student perceptions of 'good' feedback?

A report by Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education Scotland

August 2018

Summary report and areas for discussion





The project

As part of the Focus On: Feedback from Assessment project, QAA Scotland undertook an analysis of Student-Led Teaching Award nomination data to explore what students value in the feedback they receive from assessment.

At the start of the Focus On: Feedback from Assessment project, QAA Scotland consulted with all Scottish HEIs and students' associations, and as a result, decided to investigate what students think about the feedback they receive with an emphasis on exploring the topic using existing evidence.

Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs) are well-established within the Scottish higher education sector as a way to recognise and celebrate teaching excellence. Students provide statements in support of their nomination, with decisions on awards focused on the quality of nomination statements rather than the number of nominations. Because of the emphasis on the quality of nomination statements, SLTAs provide a valuable source of evidence to understand students' views on teaching and specifically for the purposes of this report, on feedback from assessment.

The report draws on an analysis of recent SLTA data from 10 students' associations. Of the ten organisations providing data, six had specific feedback award categories such as 'Best Feedback' and the remainder referenced feedback in nominations for general award categories such as 'Best Lecturer'.

Identifying key themes

The focus of the analysis was on interpreting perceptions of 'good' feedback as expressed by students through their qualitative nomination statements and identifying key themes.

Several students' associations provided several years of data. Just under 5,000 nominations were received and reviewed, and of these an illustrative sample of 318 nominations from across the 10 institutions was used to analyse and explore the weighting of different aspects of feedback.



Key themes

Three key themes that were critical to students' experiences of feedback:

1. **The Nature of Feedback**
2. **The Personal Qualities of the Teacher**
3. **Support for Students**

These three themes emerged across all nomination data, in both specific and general award categories.

The Nature of Feedback was the most significant theme, focusing on aspects of feedback and the feedback process which students value, and which they recognise as supporting their learning and educational success.

The Personal Qualities of the Teacher theme recognises that feedback sits within the teacher-student relationship and that there are characteristics which students positively identify as a reason for nominating their teachers. This study indicates that exploring feedback cannot be detached from the teacher-student relationship – and the personal attributes shaping the dynamic of that relationship.

Finally, the academic expertise and Support for Students that accompanies the provision of feedback was identified as critical to students' perceptions of what good feedback is.

Discussion of each of the key themes follows.

What next?

On pages 8 to 10, you can find key issues for discussion on each of the key themes for staff who provide feedback on assessment to students.

A further set of discussion questions is also included for students' associations and higher education institutions (pages 10–12).

These questions are intended to prompt debate and discussion about ways to enhance students' experiences of feedback.

Findings from the report will be discussed at the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee in autumn 2018 where decisions on action arising from the research will take place.

Key Theme 1: Nature of Feedback

Students value forward-oriented feedback that helps develop future work

Forward-oriented feedback was the biggest topic in this theme. Students said they value constructive feedback that provides clear direction and that they like examples that show what teachers are looking for and that helps them to be able to see very practically how to develop future work. The investment in providing this type of helpful and useful feedback is recognised repeatedly throughout the sample. There was also an emotional aspect within the forward-oriented theme, as students also said they value feedback which is motivational and supports the identification of goals, whether that be improving a certain skill, achieving a particular grade or pursuing a career path. Students said that this kind of feedback engages them in their learning and that when teachers provide feedback which instils student belief in their ability it makes them believe in themselves too.

Students value feedback that helps them understand their performance

Frequently explored alongside forward-oriented feedback, and linked to helping students to develop future work, feedback which enhances understanding of performance was valued by students and was another significant reason students nominated their teachers for an SLTA. Students said feedback needs to be focused and clear and help the student understand how they performed and how to improve. Students said that part of this process involved supporting them to understand how to reflect critically on their work, for example by designing prompts and structured activities around assignments and making these part of the feedback dialogue.

Students value a variety of different approaches to feedback

Different approaches were recognised by students as ways of engaging them in their learning through feedback. While there are examples of teachers using audio-visual and online methods of feedback, it was the variety that students mentioned most – there were lots of references to the benefits of using varied approaches and environments to provide feedback including individual, small group, and large class feedback. Providing different types of feedback was recognised by students as being good practice that they valued.

Students value timeliness more than turnaround

Quick turnaround of feedback on assessment is clearly valued by students, and while this analysis indicates that students welcome turnaround within a few days of the assessment deadline, this is frequently discussed in subjective terms that are less specific. For example, students will describe the teacher provision of feedback as prompt and timely. The use of the latter term in particular, and the prominent recognition of forward-oriented feedback in the sample, supports the idea that while students do want to receive feedback quickly, feedback that is useful and which can be used in future assessments or exams is deemed most valuable.

Students value detail, fairness and personalisation in the feedback they receive

Investment in detailed, high quality feedback which provides a fair appraisal of a student's work and engages with them as individuals, is valued in the nomination data but coupled with expectations on turnaround signifies a potential tension for teachers.

Students value consistency in feedback practice across their educational experience

Consistency is a continued theme throughout the nomination data. Consistency of experience is valued by students in the nature of feedback (such as turnaround and the level of detail), the support available (such as the extent of academic guidance and availability of teachers) and the relationship they can expect with their teachers (such as the enthusiasm a teacher will bring to the subject). Consistency is also important to students so that they can understand what the expectations are of them across the institution in which they study and what support they can expect. Students value understanding what level of relationship they will have with their teachers and what responsibilities they have as self-directed learners.

Key Theme 2: Personal Qualities of the Teacher

Students value feedback that comes from staff who provide an open and welcoming learning environment

The words fun and friendly are repeatedly mentioned within the nomination data. Students say that when teachers provide an open and welcoming learning environment this is not only helpful in engaging them, but results in the teacher appearing more relatable and as someone students feel they can approach with questions or to discuss feedback.

Students value feedback that comes from teachers who actively promote their subject and current research to students

This enthusiasm and passion for teaching and student learning cultivate a positive relationship between the teacher and student, and foster engaging and stimulating learning environments.

Students value dialogue and interaction around feedback

A learning environment where teachers seek and actively respond to student input to the way they facilitate classes, engage with students, or provide feedback is important to students. The nomination data indicates that students perceive this kind of two-way interaction as a way that teachers display commitment to their students and investment in their learning and success. This open approach fosters a culture of mutual respect and can shape the way that students engage, and feel welcome to engage, in the feedback process.

Key Theme 3: Support for Students

Students value feedback that gives them academic expertise and guidance in their subject

Students recognised the role of their teachers in providing high quality academic expertise and guidance, which can include providing up-to-date literature and insight into contemporary developments in the discipline. Of course, students benefit from this support when teachers develop assessment methods, but the students expressed further value from this in deepening their interest and engagement with their discipline or profession. This academic support is complemented by broader conceptions of feeling supported in all aspects of their study experience. This all-encompassing sense of feeling supported by their teacher 'at each step of the way' has prompted students to nominate their teacher and is therefore indicative of the value students ascribe to support.

Students value time invested in providing feedback

Students frequently nominated teachers who they perceived were investing time in providing feedback. Examples included students highlighting detailed marking and arranging meetings to discuss feedback or difficulties a student may have had in interpreting an assignment or understanding a difficult topic. Time invested in supporting students is subjective, but students consider this in relation to their expectations, other study experiences, or their awareness of the number of students for whom the teacher is responsible.

Students value teacher availability

In the nomination data, students commented on the importance of being able to access the teacher directly, whether face-to-face or by email, and that this availability and direct engagement was welcomed and was viewed as a particularly valued source of support.



Key Issues for discussion on key themes

Key Theme 1: Nature of feedback

- Students value feedback that is forward-oriented and which contains clear support and guidance on ways they can develop their future work. In your feedback to students can you identify three action points for a student to take forward?
- In preparing for future assignments is there the opportunity to ask students to signpost the ways they addressed previous feedback from assessments? You could ask students to identify this in preparation for a one-to-one discussion or small group activity. Or within a cover sheet for their next assignment, ask them to identify three ways they acted on/sought to address previous feedback.
- To encourage student reflection, what more might you do to enable you to understand areas of importance for students? For example, could you ask students to submit a cover sheet with each assessment in which they identify specific areas on which they would appreciate your feedback?
- Students value feedback that recognises them as individuals, makes them feel supported and builds self-efficacy. Ensuring that feedback is personalised is particularly challenging in large student groups. Where meeting students individually is difficult, using cover sheets that include a reflective statement on the way they engaged with previous feedback, or areas on which they specifically want feedback on and why, can allow you to tailor your feedback to the individual and perhaps acknowledge some of their identified interests or areas of challenge in their reflective statement.
- Feedback can be used to develop the student's commitment to their subject area, degree pathway or professional goals. Are there ways they can be encouraged to engage with feedback linked to their degree pathway or professional goals? For example, tailored feedback commenting on their journey towards joining a certain profession.
- The focus should not simply be on quick turnaround of feedback, but ensuring that timescales for feedback enable students to reflect and act on feedback in future assessments. How can you schedule feedback effectively considering assessment timing?
- Students recognise good feedback as provided in different contexts and at different stages before, during and after the assessment. Could you consider providing different types of feedback, and signposting to students when feedback is being provided?
- What opportunity is there to explore with student cohorts the different ways of providing feedback as a way of enhancing their assessment literacy? Could this be explored within module and programme teams?
- It is important to provide clarity of expectations on assessment turnaround times. What could you do to improve your practice in this area?

Key Theme 2: Personal Qualities of the Teacher

- Consider opportunities to exhibit your passion and commitment to your subject area. How can you impart your enthusiasm to your students and engage students in the subject?
- Explore opportunities to engage students in dialogue on the feedback process. Can this be done with different class or assessment formats? To what extent is support provided to develop assessment and feedback literacies?
- Appreciate and recognise the challenges that students may face and that you are a source of care. Reflect on your own experiences of study and how you felt receiving feedback on assessments. How can you translate this experience to your own teaching?
- Personal qualities are noticed by students; displaying a sense of humour and being friendly were noted as two key personal qualities making teachers appear approachable. What personal qualities enable you to build rapport and to connect with your students?
- Reflect on how approachable you seem to your students. Are there opportunities for informal discussion with students? Are you open to their feedback? What are the opportunities for student feedback throughout the module?
- In many cases, students recognised commitment as exceptional considering teacher workload and numbers of students. Teachers can manage student expectations by clearly stating their own expectations and manageable commitment to feedback in terms of process and timescales.

Key Theme 3: Support for Students

- Students value academic guidance that includes inspiring them and keeping them up to date with relevant research, developments and activities in the discipline, field or profession. In what ways can research-teaching or teaching-practice links be strengthened?
- Can there be explicit expectation setting and communication of boundaries to students about working hours, availability and anticipated response times? This could go beyond outlining physical time limits but also exploring expectations and communicating those to students around the likely amount and type of feedback provided at different levels of study.
- Is there scope to explore common departmental or programme approaches to student contact and teacher availability?
- Students appreciate when their teachers are available for discussion before, during and after assessments. Could and should this contact time be more formalised or organised? Should this vary at different levels of study?
- How could you support a community of practice to cultivate support for students in joining an academic community? Could this be peer-led? Across levels of study?

Key issues for discussion for different audiences

Students' Associations

- Analysis of institutional SLTA data could be used to help develop students' association policy and engage students in a culture of learning and teaching enhancement.
- While each students' association runs its award independently, there could be merit in cross-sector sharing of practice in approaches to running SLTA schemes and the type of data collected. It is likely that not all students' associations will have the resource to analyse the SLTA data and so participating in a cross-sector community of practice could be a useful source of support.
- As well as providing peer support in developing SLTAs, a cross-sector network or community of practice, potentially embedded within the Enhancement Theme work in Scotland, could support the development of a shared evidence base across the sector. Within this study, while there were some similarities in the data received from students' associations, there were also many inconsistencies which prevented the opportunity for a more detailed cross-sector comparative analysis, for example to consider whether conceptions of good feedback vary in discipline areas, in distance versus campus-based study, and taking into account differences between those nominated (such as demographic details). If there was a willingness among students' associations, some consistency in data collection could allow a deeper level of analysis and enable students' associations to strengthen policy in this area.
- Students' associations may want to consider the use of open questions within nomination forms as a way of accessing student perspectives on good teaching and support.
- The quality of the nomination data means that with appropriate permissions this could be a valuable resource in the design of teaching staff development. This could provide a platform for more collaborative working in learning and teaching enhancement between the students' association and the institution.
- Similarly, the rich nomination statements provide an insight into student perceptions of good practice which could be used to complement end of module evaluations

Institutions

- This research indicates that good quality feedback is commonly provided within positive, open and supportive relationships between teachers and students. This presents a challenge in contexts where teachers have large student groups. Similarly, while students value detailed feedback that enhances their understanding of performance and supports their future performance, there is a potential challenge in meeting expectations in terms of providing this promptly after the assessment deadline. Fostering and sustaining feedback dialogue requires teachers having the capacity to build relationships and invest time in feedback. Institutions need to consider the best approaches to workload allocation and teaching group sizes, as well as providing the space for innovative and creative approaches to assessment and feedback, whether that be incorporating the use of technology to provide feedback (such as audio or video feedback), or exploring different contexts in which feedback can be provided (such as group feedback in lectures and group feedback in tutorials). How can this debate be taken forward within your institution?
- Consistency of experience is important to students. Clear communication of assessment criteria, types of feedback and turnaround times are vital. In many cases, students recognised commitment as exceptional and considered this in terms of numbers of students and workload, so there is case to be made for clear expectation management of the feedback process. How is this done currently? What could be improved?
- Similarly, programme level consistency is important so that a student has a comparable feedback experience across different levels of study and with different teachers, and so that the student can look to implement the feedback in other aspects of their study beyond a particular piece of assessment or module. Exploring programme-focused assessment could be another opportunity to strengthen student engagement with feedback.
- The SLTA nomination data is a rich source of evidence within the students' association. Could the institution explore working in partnership with the students' association to support an analysis of the data? This could inform the enhancement of learning and teaching, and staff development.

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