

**sparqs CONSULTANCY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE
TOOLKIT ON FEEDBACK ON ASSESSMENT**

INTRODUCTION

About this toolkit

This document is a toolkit commissioned by the University of Dundee to assist staff and students to reflect on the practice of feedback on assessment. The toolkit was conceived initially to work in three pilot schools – Dundee Law School; Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design; and the School of Nursing & Midwifery.

The toolkit consists of two distinct parts – the first, “*Identifying and sharing effective practice*” will draw on research conducted within and beyond the university into tools of feedback on assessment, and explore the value of tools and how effective examples can be shared within, between and beyond the university’s schools. The second, “*The student view*” will explore how the student view of the feedback they receive can shape and enhance the practice of feedback on assessment, exploring the engagement of both individual students and representatives by staff and student officers.

Throughout the toolkits, specific questions for discussion and consideration are posted in bold, italic font like this. Suggested points to discuss and agree ACTION are also highlighted in the same way.

The toolkit is, based on consultation with the university, shaped by three broad characteristics:

1. It is best utilised by small groups of staff and students together, ideally including module and course leaders, tutors, class representatives and school presidents.
2. It aims to be a “light touch”, providing exercises and questions that can easily provoke discussion or reflection among practitioners and representatives.
3. It may help staff provide areas of research or work that could form a part of certificates in academic practice.

Background to sparqs

sparqs (Student Participation in Quality Scotland) is funded by the Scottish Funding Council to assist institutions and students’ associations in their development of student engagement in the quality of the learning experience. Its main areas of work include training and support, events, sharing practice and consultancy; full details of which can be found at www.sparqs.ac.uk. It is through the aforementioned consultancy work that the university has worked with sparqs to develop this toolkit.

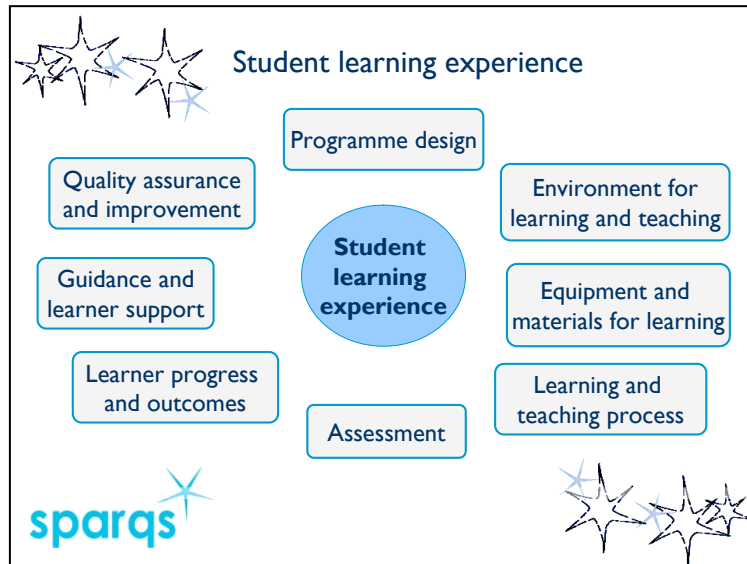
I: IDENTIFYING AND SHARING EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

(a) Assessment and the student learning experience

Assessment – and the feedback given to students on it – is one of the key elements of the student learning experience.

Those elements are illustrated in this slide, taken from sparqs' class rep training materials.

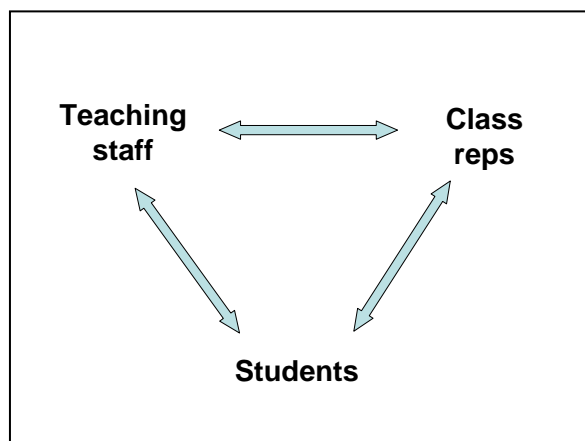
In the class rep training, sparqs encourages participants to use these headings as a way



of breaking down the learning experience into “bite-size chunks” about which they can ask specific, targeted questions of their peers. For instance, under “Assessment”, class reps might ask:

1. How do students feel about the way they are assessed (eg continuously or by exam; summatively or formatively)? What do they like or not like?
2. How do students feel about the feedback they gain on that assessment? What are the good examples of practice where staff have given students really helpful pointers to consider in their next learning?

Consider your experience of assessment and feedback on assessment. Compared to the other elements of the student learning experience, how productive is the flow of student views on “Assessment” along each of the three lines in this diagram?



ACTION: Agree individually and as a group whether you consider there is a need to increase the flow of student view on assessment vis-à-vis other areas of the student learning experience.

(b) Defining assessment

Of course, an agreement among staff and students as to what assessment actually is may be an important early step. For instance, it is likely your definition will be more than just staff giving helpful advice to students after their assessment. Many definitions will also include the feedback students can give each other, and the ongoing conversation about assessment that can generate between staff and students.

Beyond that, how feedback works can be shaped by policies or practices that are in place in your school and the university as a whole.

The University of Strathclyde has developed 12 principles of effective feedback¹, summarised below.

To what extent do you firstly agree with and secondly have evidence for each of these principles in your learning or teaching? Do staff and students have different answers to these questions? And how might your responses to these principles vary according to different levels and disciplines of study?

1. Help clarify what good performance is.	2. Encourage 'time and effort' on challenging learning tasks.	3. Deliver high quality feedback information that helps learners self-correct.
4. Provide opportunities to close any gap between current and desired performance.	5. Ensure that summative assessment has a positive impact on learning.	6. Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning (peer and teacher-student).
7. Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in training.	8. Give choice in the topic, method, criteria, weighting or timing of assessments.	9. Involve students in decision-making about assessment policy and practice.
10. Support the development of learning communities.	11. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.	12. Provide information to teachers that can be used to shape teaching.

ACTION: Identify which principles, if any, you as an individual, team or school might need to focus further on in terms of enhancing feedback on assessment.

¹ The University of Strathclyde's 12-point Principles of Good Assessment and Feedback can be explored in full at: <http://www.strath.ac.uk/learnteach/teaching/staff/assessfeedback/12principles/>

(c) Tools of feedback on assessment

The tables that follow outline some tools which staff can use to give feedback to students on assessment – many of which are in widespread use throughout the university.

The first table divides them according to two axes:

1. *Reactive support v proactive support*; either giving feedback after the assessment or anticipating potential errors by highlighting beforehand the common mistakes that can be made.
2. *Collective audience v individual audience*; giving feedback either to the whole class on the common trends, or to each individual student on their own work.

The second table divides the same tools according to two further axes:

1. *Informal feedback v formal feedback*.
2. *Staff-led feedback* (where staff explain the strengths or weaknesses of a piece of work) *v student-led feedback* (where students will share observations on each other’s assessments).

Table 1

	Individual audience	
Reactive support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students marking each other’s answers • Using small seminars or tutorials to go over papers in a more 1to1 basis • Customised written comments on a piece of work • Giving verbal comments about a piece of work, as part of a 1to1 • Standard feedback sheet appended to piece of work • Recording short, personal podcasts to individual students, for instance sent through VLE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Feeding forward” to further drafts or next assessments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recording a podcast describing the common themes in students’ assessed work • Using lectures to go over common errors or misunderstandings • Showing good and poor examples of work in class, considering both against the module descriptors • Putting a few pages of general feedback on the VLE • Emphasising availability for 1to1 requests from students, advertising available slots in classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making edited versions of last year’s feedback (including common faults) available at the same time as the assignment • Creating template essays with footnotes and comments that highlight key approaches in content, argument construction, referencing techniques and so on. • Holding a whole-class seminar on feedback that both covers key points from a recent assignment and prepares for second one
	Collective audience	Proactive support

Table 2

Formal feedback	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students marking each other's answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customised written comments on a piece of work • Standard feedback sheet appended to piece of work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using small seminars or tutorials to go over papers in a more 1to1 basis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasising availability for 1to1 requests from students, advertising available slots in classes • Recording a podcast describing the common themes in students' assessed work • Putting a few pages of general feedback on the VLE • Showing good and poor examples of work in class, considering both against the module descriptors • Using lectures to go over common errors or misunderstandings • Recording short, personal podcasts to individual students, for instance sent through VLE • Giving verbal comments about a piece of work, as part of a 1to1 • Making edited versions of last year's feedback (including common faults) available at the same time as the assignment • Creating template essays with footnotes and comments that highlight key approaches in content, argument construction, referencing techniques and so on. • Holding a whole-class seminar on feedback that both covers key points from a recent assignment and prepares for second one • "Feeding forward" to further drafts or next assessments
Peer-led feedback	Staff-led feedback
Informal feedback	

Consider the following questions:

1. *In the first table, the majority of tools are more collective than individual, perhaps due to the more efficient use of staff time it represents. Where does the ideal balance lie between collective and individual?*
2. *In the first table only one tool is individual and proactive. Should there be more, or do such tools undermine the idea of self-directed learning?*
3. *The second table shows the majority of tools being informal and staff-led. Is this inevitable (because of the advantages of the informal environment, and the expertise that staff have in assessing work), or could there be more formal tools or more opportunities for students to reflect as a group on their and each other's work?*

4. **Which of the tools would you endorse from your experience; consider trying; or remove from the table above; and which tools would you add? Which tools are widespread or standard in your team and school?**
5. **Do staff and students differ in their views as to the most valuable quadrant in each table?**

ACTION: *From your answers to the above questions, establish the specific tools you would like to see your school do more work on.*

(d) Sharing within schools

Across the staff team, there will be a variety of practice in feedback on assessment, with great examples being used, but sharing, comparing and discussing those approaches will be a valuable way of improving practice.

What are the mechanisms available to staff to share their practice within schools, and which are most valuable? The following list of suggestions is certainly not exhaustive:

1. **Course or school-level committees, for instance:**
 - a. **Standing items that discuss assessment and feedback on assessment.**
 - b. **Evidence presented by class reps or from module evaluation reports.**
2. **Dedicated meetings, seminars or professional development sessions that explore feedback on assessment.**
3. **Informal collaboration, for instance on use of technology to give feedback on assessment.**
4. **Discussions about assessment at programme design stage**
5. **Agreeing a school-level definition of feedback (see section (b)).**

ACTION: *Agree some points that would help you develop a school-wide approach to feedback on assessment that supports all staff yet accommodates the potential diversity of curriculum areas within your school.*

(e) Sharing between schools

Although there will be inevitable differences between the approaches to learning and teaching between schools, there is nevertheless scope for sharing of good practice on feedback on assessment, for instance through college or university level committees or cross-university staff development seminars or courses.

How easy is it for staff to learn and share from colleagues elsewhere in the university?

What ideas have been adapted in your school that were first tried elsewhere? What tools has your school created or introduced successfully that could be learned from by other schools?

ACTION: Identify one piece of your good practice that could be shared, and one from beyond your school which could be explored, piloted or applied.

(f) Sharing beyond the university

Staff will often have opportunities to network with staff at other institutions, often those teaching similar subjects. These might be through professional bodies, HEA Subject Centres or other opportunities.

What value do such networks have to compare and contrast practice in feedback on assessment between institutions?

ACTION: Develop or identify a piece of effective practice that could be celebrated or shared at a national level.

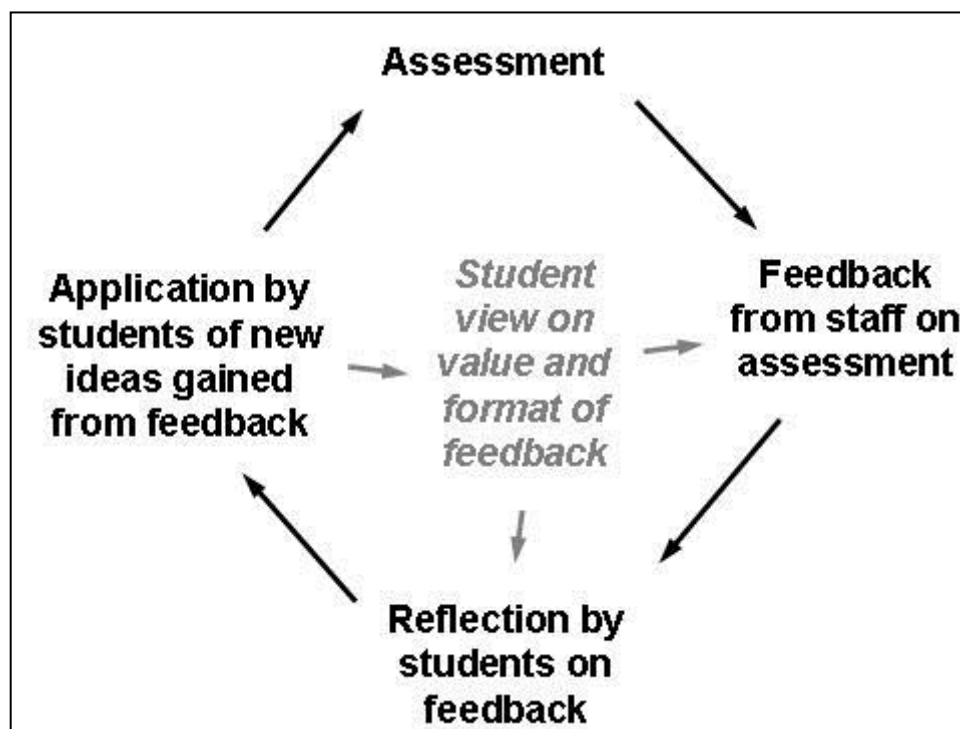
2: THE STUDENT VIEW

(g) Engaging students

This section focuses on how students can be engaged in the issue of feedback on assessment, not just in giving views on the usefulness of the feedback they receive but also on helping to shape the tools that are used.

For instance, students may play a helpful role in identifying what sort of advice is most valuable in identifying action points and improving future learning, and their views might also help staff assess which tools of giving feedback are most effective. This learner input may be valuable in improving teaching, in enhancing professional practice, and above all in helping celebrate successful practice. Some students, such as more active representatives, may even be able to help shape existing or new tools.

The role that students can play in the cycle of feedback on assessment is illustrated by this slide.



This section explores the generality of the student population first and then the role that representatives can play.

(h) General student population

Staff may be able to learn from student views on how helpful feedback has been through two broad means:

1. *Formal* – comments in module evaluation forms about the feedback they have gained, participation in focus groups, responses in institutional or national surveys (eg the National Student Survey).
2. *Informal* – views or reactions expressed in I to Is, lectures, by email or via VLE discussions and other ad hoc conversations.

What balance of formal and informal gives staff the student input that they can best learn from? Is there an answer that would be common for your team or school?

How well do students receive general feedback that comes via technology, eg podcasts or VLE presentations, as compared to more traditional tools such as assessment cover sheets or I to Is with staff?

How has student input shaped further practice or policy in your school on giving feedback on assessment?

ACTION: Identify any necessary journey between your school's current and ideal practice on the formal/informal balance.

(i) Engaging student representatives

Student representatives – such as class reps or your school president – may have a key role to play in shaping the process of giving feedback on assessment. Here are three questions or points to consider.

Look at the student learning experience diagram (section (a)), and reflect again on the extent to which staff receive accurate, informed feedback on these issues from class representatives.

How do course reps make the most of course committees? Do they present helpful, useful perspectives on the student experience of assessment feedback? Are they invited to proactively raise these issues, and do they feel confident to do so?

How can representatives – such as the school president – be used to undertake student-led research into the issue of feedback on assessment? If there are opportunities in terms of identifying good practice or areas for improvement, might students-as-researchers play a valuable part in undertaking surveys or focus groups, investigating student views and presenting them to staff?

ACTION POINTS: Agree some new ways to engage your student representatives in this area; whether small actions or large projects. If students are not present as you discuss this, set up or use a meeting where you can present your proposals to them.

RESOURCES

http://wiki.cetis.ac.uk/index.php?title=Assessment_and_Feedback - presentations from the one day conference on Assessment and Feedback jointly organised by JISC CETIS and the Making Assessment Count project, held on 2 February 2011 at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow.

<http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/feedback/index.html> - resources from the University of Edinburgh

<http://www.strath.ac.uk/learnteach/teaching/staff/assessfeedback/> - resources from the University of Strathclyde, including the 12 principles of effective feedback
<http://www.strath.ac.uk/learnteach/teaching/staff/assessfeedback/12principles/>

The Smarter Study Skills Companion – Weyers & McMillan, Prentice Hall, 2009 – particularly chapter 62

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