

Is formative feedback effective?

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Background

We explore the extent to which students feel supported for their summative assessments through their formative feedback and any follow-ups such as office hours. We focus on undergraduate experiences in *Psychology and Behavioural Science (PBS)* and *International Relations (IR)* departments.

The final population studied are undergraduate students who have completed the **IR101, IR205, PB100 and PB204** courses in the academic year 2020/21. These four courses feature assessment types in which the summative assessments directly build on the formatives.

We utilise a mixed-methods approach by circulating a survey and then, conducting focus groups. There were 46 survey respondents in total. The approximate response rates are 22% for IR205, 4% for IR101, 22% for PB100 and 26% for PB204. We ran focus groups for IR205, PB100 and PB204 with a total of 9 participants asking open-ended questions about the formative feedback they received and any recommendations for improvements.

Explicit links between the formatives and the summative, detailed and consistent feedback and easy to access office hours meant students felt confident to take their summative assessments.

Main issues

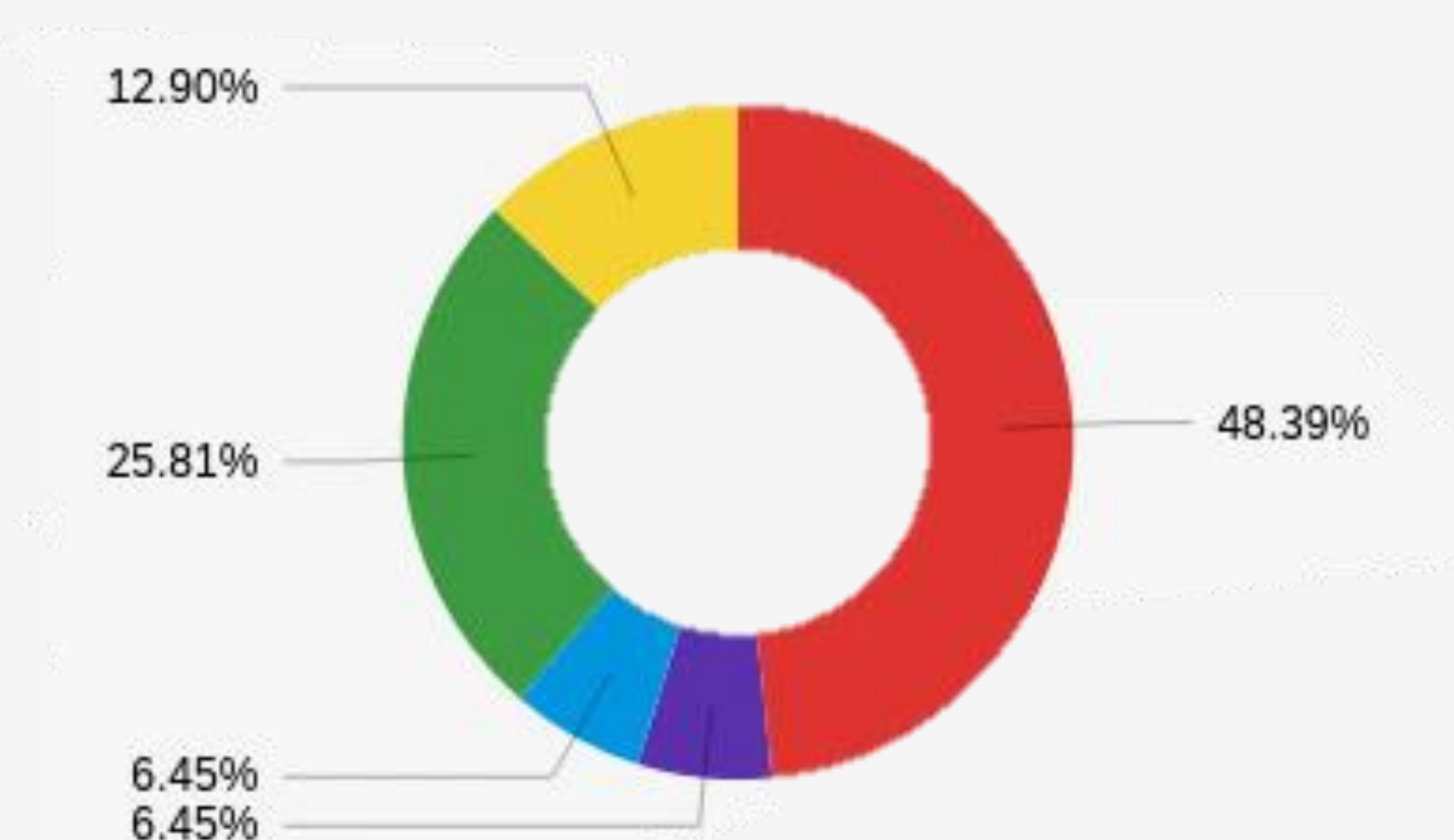
Lack of detail within feedback

- Only **33% students were satisfied** with how detailed their formative feedback was and **48% disagree/strongly disagree** that feedback adequately highlighted their strengths in assessments
- Students complained of 'copy-pasted' comments or open-ended questions with no further guidance

Inconsistent feedback

- **48% students disagree/strongly disagree** that formative and summative feedback did not fundamentally contradict each other
- Focus groups highlight this as a main factor affecting student preparation and performance
- Part of the student cohort would have detailed feedback while other got brief remarks
- Formative feedback received from the GTA's and from the course convener was also contradictory **indicating a lack of clear messaging from the course convener to the GTAs**

Students answered the question: "Overall, receiving formative feedback helped improve my performance in the summative assessment" by selecting one of the options.



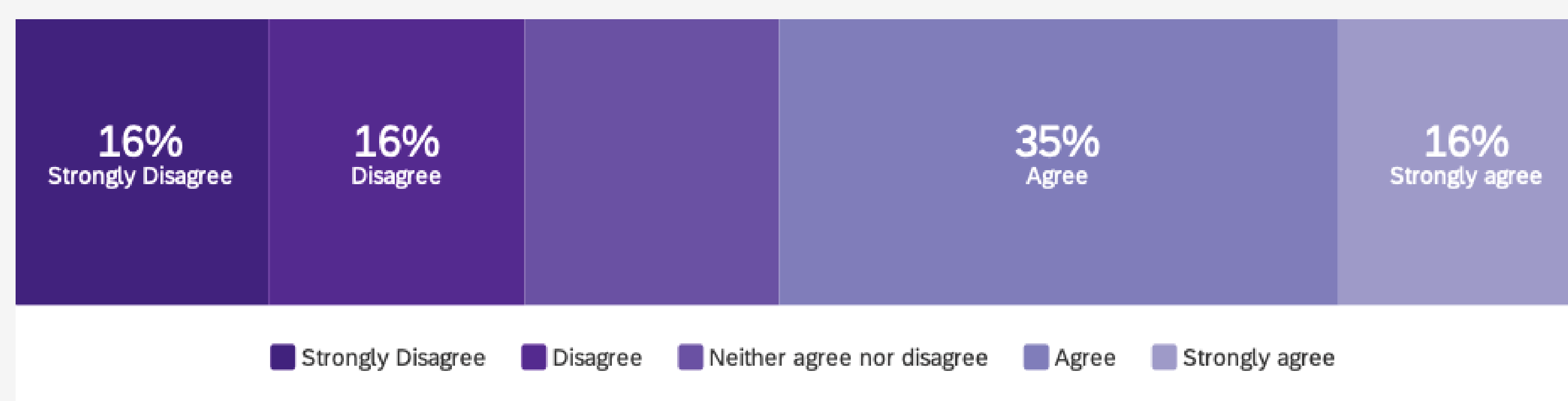
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Main issues (contd.)

No proper link between formative and summative assessments

- Students felt unprepared for summative assessments when they did not properly build on previous formatives
- The Focus group of PB100 highlighted that students had to complete a 3,500 essay while none of the formatives tested involved writing an essay. Thus, while helpful in building other skills, completing 3 unrelated formatives meant that the students still felt unprepared for their final summative essay.

Students answered the question: "The link between the formative and the summative assessment was clearly explained to me prior to undertaking the formative assessment." by selecting one of the options.



Recommendations

Clarity regarding content

- Define **scope of assessment** such as outlining which theories or concepts can be utilised and, where applicable, form links between them and with assessment objectives.
- Provide examples of previous work related to summative and formative assignments.

Coherent progression of assignments

- Formatives should be **clearly linked to summative** assignments and the links should be highlighted especially for first-year undergraduates.

Standardised feedback

- Provide **detailed feedback** that highlight and justify strengths and areas of improvement in relation to assessment criteria, learning and assessment objectives.
- Ensure **consistency** in length, details, and areas of focus, **across different classes for a particular module**.

Peer feedback

- Create provision for peer feedback on formative assessments.
- Peer feedback can **entail academic critique and review** from peers based on assessment criteria and learning objectives.
- Templates/tutorials for standard peer feedback should be provided for standardised, consistent and coherent feedback especially for first-year undergraduates.

Office hour support

- Departments should provide details on how and when to book office hours **especially for first-year undergraduates**.
- Departments should also communicate importance of office hours and **what to expect and learn** from them especially for first-year undergraduates.
- Departments can also facilitate **provision of group office hours** and extra office hours during challenging academic periods.