

Summative Feedback: Experiences and Expectations of the Sociology Department

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LSE Change Makers

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Background

Summative feedback is at the heart of LSE's learning culture, intended to bridge current performance with future growth. But student experiences reveal significant disparities in how effectively this feedback achieves its purpose. The current system creates a paradox: despite increasing assessment workloads, students often receive feedback that lacks actionable guidance, whether they are seeking foundational improvement or striving for higher levels of academic achievement. Even when feedback is delivered within the Academic Code's timeframe, its quality and clarity vary significantly depending on the marker. This research investigates why this policy-practice gap persists among undergraduates in the department of Sociology, and how the department's feedback culture might be redesigned to better transform learning. By prioritizing undergraduate student voices, we will pinpoint systemic strengths, breakdowns, and alternatives that foster meaningful academic progression.

Literature review

Existing researches mainly identified three persistent shortcomings in academic feedback:
(1) mismatched instructor-student expectations (Robinson et al., 2013)
(2) institutional prioritization of grade justification over developmental guidance (Wood & Jones, 2020)
(3) disciplinary adaptation challenges, especially between quantitative/qualitative criteria (Neupane Bastola & Hu, 2020).

While prior studies focus on first-year undergraduates, STEM fields, or developing contexts, this research highlights unique feedback challenges in elite and theory-driven LSE Sociology programmes through three year levels. Specifically, LSE's narrow grade differentiation renders abstract criteria (e.g., critical analysis). Consequently, standard feedback interventions may prove inadequate for advanced social science education in competitive environments.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine these gaps, using semi-structured interviews informed by the need to balance consistency across interviews with flexibility to explore individual participant's unique perspectives.

9 undergraduates across all three year groups were recruited through convenience sampling to ensure a diversity of experiences across different stages of the degree programme. Prior to data collection, we first completed an ethics form and received formal approval from the Department. We also submitted a data management plan outlining how interview data would be securely stored, anonymised, and handled throughout the project in accordance with LSE's data protection policies. Derived through a thematic review of a departmental survey previously distributed to students by the LSE Sociology Department, we developed an interview guide structured into four thematic sections:

1. Essay feedback
2. In-person exam feedback
3. Perception of marking practices
4. Overall satisfaction/suggestions

After data collection, all interviews were transcribed from audio recordings into text. Our team then carried out a thematic analysis, which allowed us to identify recurring patterns and concerns across participants.

Findings

The findings reveal widespread dissatisfaction with the current assessment feedback system, centering on five key themes:

1. Lack of Specificity and Actionable Guidance

Students frequently described feedback as vague or overly general—comments such as *"needs deeper analysis"* or *"unclear argument"* were common, but rarely linked to specific parts of the text. This made it difficult for students to understand what exactly needed improvement or how to revise effectively. Those who received inline or paragraph-level feedback found it far more helpful than summary comments alone.

2. Inconsistent Standards Across Markers and Courses

Students were confused by discrepancies in expectations between different modules, departments, and individual markers. A piece of work praised in one class might be criticised in another. This inconsistency made it hard to develop a coherent writing strategy, especially when academic mentors lacked insight into course-specific marking criteria.

Findings (continued)

3. Exam Feedback Felt Ineffective or Absent

Collective feedback provided after sit-in exams was perceived as too generic to be useful. Many students reported never seeing their marked exam scripts and were unable to identify which parts of their answers were weak or strong. This undermined their ability to prepare for future assessments.

4. Barriers to Feedback Clarification

Policies that prohibit discussing marks with the original marker left many students unsure whom to approach with questions. As a result, students either avoided office hours altogether or resorted to "workarounds"—for example, posing essay-specific queries as general theoretical questions in order to gain clarification indirectly.

5. Emotional and Motivational Impact

While students welcomed constructive criticism, unclear or overly negative feedback could be demoralising. Some participants suggested that even high-achieving students (70+) would benefit from targeted suggestions for further improvement, rather than being left without feedback simply because their grade was good. Overall, our analysis suggests that feedback in its current form is not fully serving its intended purpose as a tool for student learning. Students do not reject feedback *per se*—they want it to be more timely, specific, consistent, and useful for developing academic skills.

Key Recommendations

Improve Feedback Quality

- **Specificity:** Ensure feedback is clear and actionable by providing detailed suggestions
- **Combination Format:** Utilise a mix of overall comments and specific line-by-line annotations.
- **Exam Feedback:** Move away from collective feedback and instead offer individualized, concise feedback on exams. Allow students to access their exam papers with annotations, so they can better understand the feedback.
- **Timeliness:** Ensure that formative feedback is provided a few weeks before the summative assessments to allow time for students to seek clarification during the term time.
- **Consistency:** Introduce internal training or alignment sessions for faculty to ensure consistency in feedback quality across the department.

Address Policy Constraints

- Lift the ban on discussing feedback with the marker, allowing for clarification without the fear of altering grades.

Provide Better Support System

- **Proactive Support for Mid- and Low-Range Performers:** Reach out to students with mid-range grades (<60%) to offer optional office hours to go through feedback.
- **Structured Office Hours:** Encourage students to submit questions in advance and provide guidelines on how to seek feedback.
- **Reserved Slots for Feedback Discussions:** Offer guaranteed slots for all students to discuss feedback in person.
- **Feedback Workshops:** Offer non-compulsory, sessions or forums where students can discuss general and/or detailed feedback with peers and mentors.

References

Neupane Bastola, M., & Hu, G. (2020). Supervisory feedback across disciplines: does it meet students' expectations? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1780562>

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Wood, C., & Jones, G. (2020). Evaluating the nature of summative feedback on electronically submitted work at a UK University: implications for post-compulsory education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 25(4), 420–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2020.1846314>