Student Engagement with Assessment Feedback

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Topic & Research Questions

This Change Makers project examined student engagement with different formats of assessment feedback. To do so we focussed on the following three research questions: To what extent do students engage with the feedback they receive for assessments? How do term times and assessment formats factor in? What are the preferred formats of assessment feedback?

Background, Contribution & Literature Review

As receiving and responding to feedback is a key part of the learning process, studying feedback engagement from students is necessary to maximize education quality at the LSE. Our research hopes to generate insights that will help both students in their educational journey and faculty in understanding how to increase teaching efficacy.

Several studies and reports have been conducted analyzing these trends. A recent paper from Mao & Lee echo insights from an older one by Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, finding that students must actively process, reflect on, and utilize feedback in order to improve their education. Additionally, learner identity and motivation shape engagement; students with stronger academic identities and an intrinsic sense of motivation are more likely to engage meaningfully with feedback (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Hiver et al., 2021). It has also been discussed that effective feedback involves dialogue; engagement increases when feedback is part of an ongoing conversation rather than one-off responses (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone & Carless, 2020). Similarly, several authors have found that multi-modal feedback best supports engagement. In other words, combining teacher, peer, and automated feedback fosters behavioural, cognitive, and emotional investment in the academic revision process (Han & Xu, 2023; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Finally, poor feedback design tends to lead to disengagement altogether. Essentially, vague, overly critical, or delayed feedback reduces student motivation and uptake (Winstone et al., 2017 & Dawson et al., 2019). As receiving and responding to feedback is a key part of the learning process, studying feedback engagement from students is necessary to maximize education quality at the LSE. Our research provides an LSE-specific contextual study of feedback engagement, and we hope to generate insights that will help both students in their educational journey and faculty in understanding how to increase teaching efficacy.

Methodology

To explore how students engage with different formats of assessment feedback and identify which formats are most effective in promoting academic development, we designed and implemented a research strategy tailored to the context of the Department of Social Policy at LSE. Our methodology was structured around three key components: survey design, data collection, and analytical strategy.

We collected primary data through an online survey, which was developed and distributed specifically for this research project. The survey was sent out to undergraduate students within the Department of Social Policy via internal communication channels, including departmental mailing lists. The timing of the survey coincided with a high-intensity academic period, term time near summative assessments, which we initially believed would provide fresh insights into students' experiences of feedback. However, this also likely contributed to the limited response rate. The survey instrument was constructed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. It included closed-ended questions aimed at gauging satisfaction, clarity, perceived usefulness, and likelihood of acting on different feedback formats. These formats included: cohort-level feedback (generalised summaries for a whole class), individualised written feedback, embedded feedback (comments inserted directly within students' assignments), and in-person verbal feedback (delivered through office hours, meetings, or informal discussions). The survey also included several open-ended questions designed to capture student reflections, critiques, and preferences. These qualitative questions sought to understand how students perceived the effectiveness of each feedback format, how they used feedback to inform future assessments, and what barriers (if any) inhibited meaningful engagement.

We adopted a dual-mode analytical approach. Quantitative data from the closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify trends across feedback types. Given the small number of respondents (approximately 10 students), we did not conduct inferential statistical testing; instead, numerical patterns were used to identify broad directions of sentiment (e.g. which formats received higher satisfaction ratings or were most commonly acted upon). In parallel, qualitative responses were coded using thematic content analysis. Student answers were examined for recurring patterns, such as references to clarity, usefulness, timeliness, specificity, or emotional impact. This inductive coding process helped identify not only which formats students valued most, but also *why*, shedding light on the pedagogical implications of effective feedback practices. Respondents were included in the analysis if they had received at least one form of formal feedback in the current academic year. The scope of our inquiry was not limited to a particular assessment type; rather, we captured responses across a range of academic activities, including essays, presentations, exams, and group work. This broader framing allowed us to compare engagement across different formats and contexts.

The most significant limitation of the research was the low response rate, despite promotion via multiple channels such as department-wide emails, student newsletters, academic representatives, and the LSE Students' Union. We also offered a small incentive in the form of a prize draw to encourage participation. However, only around ten students completed the survey. We hypothesise that the limited response may be attributed to several factors:

1. Survey fatigue, due to the number of surveys students are routinely asked to complete.
2. High workload and academic stress, as the survey coincided with a peak assessment period.
3. Low perceived salience of feedback as a problem area for students, particularly if current formats are not viewed as overtly problematic.

To mitigate the impact of this small sample size, we chose to focus our analysis on the qualitative data, which offered rich, reflective insights. These responses helped us identify not only student preferences, but the underlying rationales and emotional responses associated with different feedback experiences. While we acknowledge that the small number of respondents limits the generalisability of our findings, the depth and consistency of student

reflections provide a credible foundation for drawing tentative conclusions and offering department-specific recommendations.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed of the purpose of the project and the use of their data in internal reports and summaries. No identifiable information was collected, and all responses have been treated with strict confidentiality in line with ethical research standards.

Data Analysis

We received a total of ten complete responses—see appendix A for the sample composition. Since our sample was not large enough for statistical analysis, we focus on the qualitative responses we received. All respondents said they read their feedback regardless of the grade they received, and whether it was a summative or formative assessment. The common theme amongst all forms of feedback was it lacked clarity on ways to improve for future assignments.

Students overall found cohort-level feedback to be somewhat helpful. The main critique was it was too vague: *"Because it wasn't constructive and was too broad/did not offer any takeaways for future improvement"*. Or *"It helped when it applied to my work - otherwise it was useless"*. The one benefit students stated was if it answered questions students themselves did not think to ask: *"Maybe people asked questions I didn't ask"*.

Students found individual-level, embedded, and in-person feedback to be the most helpful. Individual level feedback has the advantage that: *"It's specific to your own work"*. Another respondent said: *"I think it is usually useful but often I think I try to apply feedback and still don't necessarily improve"*. Regarding embedded feedback students said it: *"Makes it easy to identify specific areas of improvement because it shows directly what its talking about"*. Finally, in-person feedback is popular because it is: "*Very personal and I actually understand what they are seeing"* And *"This is probably the most useful, particularly where the professor and would encourage more feedback hours"*.

Six out of ten respondents reported using artificial intelligence in their course. The main uses were understanding concepts (5), summarising readings (4), checking answers (3), and writing drafts (1).

Findings

Students told us they have a range of different preferences when it comes to the feedback they receive, and it's clear that there's no one size fits all approach. Students have varying opinions about whether different types of feedback are useful - for example, some students told us that the individual feedback they had received had a good amount of detail, while others said it didn't have enough, and while some students thought embedded feedback was the most useful form of feedback they'd received, others found it confusing. Some common aspects that students valued across all forms of feedback included feedback that is specific to them and their work, practical suggestions for how they can improve, and pointing out specific areas of the assignment where the student could improve, or where they were successful.

The form of feedback that received the most positive responses was in-person feedback. Students value the opportunity to receive feedback by way of dialogue, with the ability to ask clarifying questions and receive an immediate response. Some comments on other forms of feedback mentioned that as well as specific feedback on the assignment in question, they would like some more holistic feedback on their academic journey and progress on the

module as a whole, so in-person feedback sessions could be a way to address this. As well as students valuing different aspects of feedback, this also speaks to different approaches to feedback across teaching staff - some will, by their nature, emphasise different things and this will appeal differently to different people. Again, the opportunity to receive in-person feedback is a valuable way to mitigate these inconsistencies by allowing staff to explain their feedback in more depth, and students to ask clarifying questions.

Key conclusions and future directions

As highlighted throughout the findings and analysis above, students are open to a variety of feedback formats. Preferences depend both on assessment format and the individual student.

Cohort-level feedback is ranked positively by some students, but less popular among others. Advantages of this format include that it allows students to anticipate a broad scope of potential challenges and critiques while allowing the students to not only learn from their own mistakes but also from those made by their peers. However, the considerable disadvantage of cohort-level feedback is its inability to address the needs of all students, especially those with less common concerns. While it is therefore advisable to prioritise other feedback formats for individualised assessments like essays, cohort-level feedback can be a useful method for more standardised assessments and exams. Additionally, its shortcomings can be addressed by using a dual approach which, for example, supplements cohort-level feedback with additional office hours. Individualised feedback and in particular embedded feedback and in-person feedback were found to be very helpful for students. Their ability to offer concrete and personalised advise is highly valued by students as this offers the best support for their long-term self-improvement. While this feedback format consequently is recommended across assessments, it should especially be prioritised if a similar assessment follows, for example if a formative assignment is followed by a similar summative assessment.

Overall, students emphasised self-improvement as the goal on which they base their engagement with and in turn the usefulness of a given feedback format on. To foster students' long-term growth and self-improvement we therefore additionally suggest taking multi-modal feedback formats into consideration. Encouraging a multi-modal learning process from the first year on by ensuring up-take of office hours as well as written feedback and peer feedback increases the likelihood that offers like additional office hours will be taken up later. It additionally addresses the shortcomings of individual methods and increases the likelihood that each student’s needs are met to support their unique academic journey.

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