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Divided by a Common Language? Evaluating Students' Understanding of the Vocabulary of Assessment and Feedback at a Single UK Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

Recent changes in UK Higher Education have renewed the importance of ensuring that assessment practices are transparent and comprehensible, not least in terms of the criteria by which the evaluation is conducted and the timeliness with which the results of that evaluation are delivered. The policies that underpin assessment and feedback, and the formal documentation to which they give rise, are necessarily robust for reasons of quality assurance and to support the learning experience, and in consequence they are typically loaded with standard terminology whose intended meaning may not be as readily apparent to students as to staff. Much work therefore remains to be undertaken in consulting with students to develop strategies to help negotiate the vocabulary of current practices such that institutional regulatory frameworks are satisfied without sacrificing intelligibility to the purported target audience.

This research draws on a series of interviews and other consultations with students conducted at City University London, UK in the 2011–12 academic year with the purpose of reviewing their understanding of the fundamental vocabulary of assessment practice, whether that vocabulary appears within the learning outcomes and assessment criteria, the feedback itself, or the wider context of assessment policy. Ultimately, it explores whether staff and students in Higher Education are presently being divided by a common language, and, in light of the

students' narratives, proposes a series of recommendations by which assessment and feedback practices may be improved. Such recommendations include the provision of papers submitted by previous students for the benefit of current cohorts, a more active engagement of students with the regulatory documentation, a greater use made of dialogic feedback methods, and the need for change to the existing educational culture to facilitate these enhancements.

Keywords

Assessment; Feedback; Vocabulary and Terminology; Assessment Criteria; Specification Documents; Student Consultation; Learner Experiences; Academic Practice; Institutional Policy; UK Higher Education.

Introduction and Method

Recent events have placed a renewed emphasis on the importance of assessment and feedback practices in UK Higher Education. The 2011 governmental White Paper and the consequent rise in tuition fees for home students to £9,000 per annum for undergraduate entry in 2012, together with the publication of Key Information Sets (KIS) from 2013–14 for undergraduate degree programmes delivered by institutions that subscribe to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), have heralded a new era of accountability and transparency on the part of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in relation to teaching quality and quantity, assessment, and student satisfaction. The increasing weight given to the league tables featured in publications such as *The Times Good University Guide*, *The Complete University Guide*, and the Unistats website has led HEIs to scrutinize all criteria by which they are evaluated in a bid to improve their rankings. In particular, assessment and feedback has consistently fared poorly in the National Student Survey (NSS), which has increasingly

influenced institutional agendas since its inception in 2005 and provides the standard measure of student satisfaction used in several league tables. Nor are assessment and feedback exclusively undergraduate concerns, as evidenced by the results of the national Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), first held in 2009. Finally, the recent revision to the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Professional Standards Framework (2011) has confirmed the importance of assessment and feedback to tertiary educational professionals, in that it was retained as one of the Framework's five headline Areas of Activity.

Trends witnessed at HEIs across the UK to tighten assessment and feedback practices in response to the changing educational climate have included the implementation of regulatory enhancements such as the reduction of feedback turnaround times and the provision of transparent assessment criteria for every assignment (both of which directly mirror points surveyed in the NSS). However, more fundamental questions have not always been asked concerning the purpose (or fitness for purpose) of such policies and the formal documentation to which they give rise, whether their implications are adequately clear to the students whose learning they are designed to support, and, if not, how their learning experience might be more effectively improved. Such policies and regulatory documents are necessarily robust for reasons of quality assurance, and in consequence they are typically loaded with standard terminology whose intended meaning may not be as readily apparent to students as to staff. Strategies still need to be developed to help negotiate the existing vocabulary of assessment and feedback practices such that regulatory frameworks are satisfied without sacrificing intelligibility to the students, to avoid the situation in which, to paraphrase the apocryphal dictum variously attributed to G. B. Shaw and Oscar Wilde concerning Britain and the US, staff and students are inadvertently being divided by a common language. Otherwise, there is

a real danger that the very quality assurance processes instigated to solve old problems will merely end up creating new ones.

There exists a substantial body of literature that either promotes good practices in assessment and feedback or advocates developmental or innovative approaches, with several previous studies explicitly indicating the disconnection between students and staff in relation to assessment and feedback as well as the need to close this gap between them. MacLellan (2001) uncovered significant differences between staff and students concerning their views on the purpose of assessment, and Woolf (2004) has advocated the necessity for a common understanding concerning the phraseology and application of assessment criteria. O'Donovan, Price, & Rust (2008) have identified that students' success in assessment is limited by their understanding of its processes and expectations, and that specification documentation alone is insufficiently meaningful as a method of conveying knowledge of required standards; while Orsmond & Merry (2011) have argued that students may not always interpret their feedback in accordance with the marker's intended meanings. However, and despite the extent of previous scholarship on assessment and feedback, much work remains to be done, not least given the dramatic changes to UK Higher Education that have taken place recently, in investigating students' understanding of the frameworks surrounding assessment and feedback at the localized level of individual institutions, placing the views of the students at the centre of enquiry and exploring ways in which the disparity between staff and students might be minimized.

This study seeks to add to current knowledge concerning what students understand to be the meaning of some of the fundamental vocabulary used in specification documents, assessment criteria, and institutional assessment and feedback policy, as well as in the feedback itself.

Moreover, it explores how the students' understanding differs from the standard meanings of this terminology in which sense it is used by staff; and, on the basis of the data collected, it also proposes some recommendations that might relieve the present disjunctures between staff and students. This context for this research is the author's own HEI, City University London, which, in the period during which the study was conducted, comprised seven distinct Schools: Cass Business School, School of Health Sciences, School of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, School of Informatics, The City Law School, School of Arts, and School of Social Sciences (the latter two being merged on 1 August 2012).

Following a number of student consultations, focus groups, and other information-gathering activities undertaken throughout the 2011–12 academic year, the study culminated with a series of interviews with Student Representatives across the University between May and July 2012, which form the principal focus of this paper. A total of nine participants, comprising at least one from every School except The City Law School and including all levels of undergraduate and postgraduate taught degrees, were individually interviewed by the author either face to face, by telephone, or via e-mail, each interview being structured around the same set of 12 standard questions and recorded for subsequent analysis. Student Representatives were specifically recruited for the research as they are best placed to witness change within their institutional context and are empowered to offer a wider snapshot of views of, and issues encountered by, the cohorts they represent rather than merely their own individual experiences. Areas of discussion explored with the interviewees included the following:

- what processes and outputs they understood as constituting feedback (whether formal written reports, preliminary advice given in tutorials or correspondence, or merely the mark itself);
- what, irrespective of institutional policy, they would interpret terms such as ‘prompt’ or ‘timely’ to mean in reference to turnaround of feedback;
- whether the feedback itself provides satisfactory clarity in terms of justifying the examiner’s decision and offering advice as to how the student might seek to improve their work in the future;
- whether the learning outcomes and marking criteria are sufficiently comprehensible to yield an understanding of what is required in order to attain a certain standard in a given assessment;
- whether the formal documentation meaningfully articulates the difference between the constituent levels of their degree programme.

This study therefore additionally facilitates the evaluation, within the context of a single HEI, of the impact of key policy change trends such as the tightening of feedback turnaround times (which, at City University London, were reduced in 2011 from six weeks to 3–4 weeks). The material garnered from the interviews was subjected to thematic analysis, which will be presented and discussed in the following section, supplemented by reference to some of the smaller-scale student consultations where these provide additional illustration. This will be followed by further sections exploring recommendations arising from the students’ narratives as well as some wider implications of the findings of this research.

Findings and Discussion

The themes emerging from the author's rigorous analysis of the data collected from the interviews fall neatly into four overarching groups, which will be discussed in turn. These groups concern students' understanding in relation to the term 'feedback' itself, the meaning of 'timeliness' in connection with feedback, the clarity of feedback, and assessment criteria and learning outcomes.

(a) Students' understanding of the meaning of the term 'feedback' itself

In order to lay strong foundations for the divergent meanings of terminology, it is instructive to scrutinize students' understanding of the term 'feedback' at the outset of discussion. The study participants were unanimous that 'feedback' comprised a qualitative component – a 'commentary' or 'explanation' – and that the term referred to more than merely the mark itself (such that they would not regard a mark in isolation to constitute feedback). At the same time, however, some acknowledged this view to be out of keeping with their experience of their wider peer communities, for whom the mark seemed to be the aspect of feedback upon which the focus principally or exclusively fell. One respondent mentioned that to students in general, 'it's all about the mark mark mark', another adding that the tutor's comments often became 'bypassed' as a consequence. A recent study by Duncan (2007) has indicated that the extent to which students are uninterested in feedback is such that they may not even read or collect it provided they already know the mark. This finding is consistent with that of the present author: in the case of one end-of-module assessment completed in January 2012, the students were surveyed as to whether they had collected the feedback report from the Administration Office or simply looked up their final portfolio mark online via the institution's Strategic Learning Environment (SLE). Of over 30 students who responded pseudonymously, just two had collected their full feedback. Thus there may be a tacit sense

among many students in which feedback is understood to refer primarily to the mark, to the extent that the two become near-synonymous.

Only one interviewee alluded to feedback existing in any context other than formally submitted assessment, for example, arising from dialogue in an academic tutorial or from questions answered over e-mail; this student then commented that 'feedback' was principally considered to refer to feedback on the former alone. One other respondent mentioned the possibility for feedback being received from people other than the tutors (for instance, from peers). A third acknowledged that feedback may be received on formative as well as summative work, noting that the distinction between the two is somewhat confusing; this is a situation not helped by the University's policy document, which describes assessment and feedback as a 'summative process [that] also acts as a strong formative tool' (City University London 2012, 1). These findings indicate that consideration of the multiplicity of different forms that feedback may take was made by only a minority of students. Two respondents made the point that a further source of confusion is the institutional deployment of the term 'feedback' in two different senses: firstly, feedback to students on their assessments; secondly, feedback from students (compliments, comments, or complaints), most commonly solicited as part of the processes of module evaluation and for the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings that all degree programmes across the institution are required to hold periodically. This yields a fundamental example of the problematic deployment of terminology, not least since the text on 'feedback' prepared centrally by the University for inclusion in all programme-level Student Handbooks is concerned exclusively with feedback from students, though a separate section on feedback to students has now been introduced for use in 2012–13.

(b) Students' understanding of the meaning of 'timeliness' in relation to feedback

City University London's revised feedback policy, which came into force in January 2011, requires feedback (including a provisional mark) to be returned within a maximum of three weeks for all interim assessments and four weeks for all end-of-module assessments. All of the participants in this study demonstrated clear knowledge of the current practice of their School, even when it did not accord with institutional policy; for instance, one respondent cited five weeks rather than four as being the standard turnaround time. (One, however, rightly observed that turnaround policy concerning feedback for formative submissions was less well defined.) They further recognized the challenge for staff of returning feedback within a given timeframe, as well as the importance of managing students' expectations as to when the feedback would be returned, and, indeed, whether it would be delivered in time to be of use to support their ongoing learning on the module or programme. Several noted that feedback needs to be received 'before […] you've forgotten what you wrote' (for reasons of institutional policy, examination scripts are not normally returned to students) and in advance of their next submission deadline.

Two of the study participants made the telling observation that, while timeliness and quality of feedback both matter for interim assessments, quality of feedback is more important than timeliness for end-of-module assessments. Their reasoning was that end-of-module feedback should provide a robust explanation for why the submission received the mark it did, but that the argument for requiring the feedback to improve one's performance on the module no longer remains applicable once that module is concluded. This view would seem to be not entirely in alignment with current pedagogical thinking given the extent to which so-called 'quick and dirty' feedback has recently been endorsed as an exemplary practice to which to aspire; for instance, Gibbs & Simpson (2004, 19) famously argued in favour of a 'trade off

between the rapidity and quality of feedback so that, for example, imperfect feedback [...] provided almost immediately may have much more impact than more perfect feedback from a tutor four weeks later'. The findings of the present study, however, suggest that the reverse might actually be more desirable to students.

One respondent acknowledged some residual confusion surrounding the intended meaning of a 'week' in the University policy on feedback, specifically, when statutory holidays occur within the marking period or feedback return dates fall outside the academic term. For instance, staff might reasonably regard three weeks as equivalent to 15 working days and view a public holiday as extending the feedback turnaround time beyond three calendar weeks (and this is permissible under University policy), whereas students might simply count 21 days from the point of submission – potentially leading to situations where students regard as being late work that was in fact turned around on time. Similarly, if the marking is completed in advance of the turnaround deadline but then not collected for a significant period thereafter because it has been returned during the vacation when the students are not on campus, they may perceive that they have not received their feedback on time in relation to its original submission date.

One respondent explicitly noted that '"timely" needs to be seen in context', adding that a one-size-fits-all deadline fails to take many contextual variables into account. To cite an obvious example, it would be unbeneficial to turn feedback around within three weeks in the case of a module with fortnightly assessments. A rigid turnaround policy would therefore appear implicitly to discourage formative submissions and multiple interim diagnostic submissions, even though they may be more pedagogically valuable to a module than the single and/or end-loaded assessment models that such a policy would seem to favour. There is also a

danger that an uncontextualized feedback turnaround policy might lead to an infelicitous mindset among staff that the only expectation upon them is to complete the marking within the prescribed timeframe, whereas students may consider factors such as the purpose of feedback (and the nature of the assessment) in determining timeliness. As one recent National Union of Students (NUS) statement on feedback (2010b, 7) advised, 'no ideal length of time can be ascribed to all feedback, [but] it should always be returned in a manner that will allow it to impact on future learning and future assessments'.

(c) The clarity of feedback to students

Several previous studies have identified that students' principal complaints about feedback include that it has been felt to be too vague, negative, and lacking in appropriate advice for future improvement (e.g. Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton 2002; Weaver 2006; Poulos & Mahony 2008; Hounsell *et al.* 2008). Concerns raised by participants in the present study crystallized not around the presence of vagueness in feedback, so much as the absence of the explanation required to clarify its observations and recommendations. One respondent cited as unhelpful a feedback report that suggested it might have been beneficial for the student to have included in the assignment more information on a particular point, but omitted to advise how to create space for this extra material in order to remain within the prescribed word limit. Another mentioned that feedback reports given on successive versions of the same assessment – in this case, formative feedback on draftwork that was subsequently revised and submitted summatively – do need to be consistent with one another, or else students are effectively presented with contradictory advice. A third interviewee mentioned a specific instance in which marks were returned for a particular assessment without any comments, leaving the students feeling disadvantaged, and, according to the participant, highlighting just how important feedback is to students. When challenged by the class, the tutor maintained

that the feedback should have been implicit from the breakdown of marks, although this would have indicated to the students only where they could improve, not how they might improve.

In general, the respondents did seem to be aware of other processes by which they could solicit clarification on their feedback from tutors upon its return. Such avenues include raising issues at SSLC meetings, using the drop-in office hours that all staff are required to hold for two hours a week during term, or e-mailing questions to the tutor. However, one participant noted a lack of consistency surrounding such possibilities in practice, commenting that 'certain lecturers are better than others at inviting you to come and meet with them and discuss [feedback] with them', and that at times supplementary support needed to be 'chase[d] down'. Another acknowledged that it was more difficult to garner additional feedback from Visiting Lecturers for reasons of their limited availability relative to full-time staff.

The extent of demand apparent from the interviews for supplementary face-to-face meetings with tutors led the author to investigate further the level of interest among students for dialogic rather than written feedback. One of the questions put to a focus group held in March 2012 concerned the students' favoured method for receiving feedback; five options (written, dialogic, telephone, podcast, screencast) were discussed before the students were polled anonymously using an electronic voting system (see Wiley 2012 for a fuller discussion). The students' preferences were registered as follows: screencast (17%), written report (33%), dialogic (50%) (n=12). The pedagogical benefits of holding a two-way conversation rather than receiving a one-way written feedback report are obvious, so much so that the NUS (2010a) has recently recommended that feedback on a students' initial piece of assessment in

every academic year should be delivered face to face, and that they should thereafter be given choice as to the format in which they wish to receive their feedback. While these ideals should be called into question on grounds of sustainability, they at least point towards the recognition of the value of different modes of delivery of feedback.

(d) Students' understanding of assessment criteria and learning outcomes

The interviews conducted for this study revealed much evidence that assessment criteria are indeed being provided across the institution in some form. However, they also indicated some residual confusion among students surrounding the difference between assessment criteria and grade-related criteria, which are separately defined by the University's policy document (City University London 2012, 2), the former as identifying the minimum requirements for success in an assessment and the latter the requirements for achieving specific marks. The matter is further problematized by the students' awareness of a third type of criteria used to detail the breakdown of marks, assigned proportionally to different areas such as use of scholarly literature, effectiveness of argument, writing style, and so forth. This yields another instance of discrepancy between institutional use of a given term, and the way in which that term is understood by students. For example, while some participants were under the impression that grade-related criteria had been supplied for their assessments, further discussion revealed that they were in reality referring to documentation identifying the breakdown of marks, which are not expressly grade-related. Nonetheless, the point remains that the students felt in such cases that sufficient information about the way in which their work would be assessed had been provided to them. Other themes arising from the interviews crystallized around the variability of assessment criteria: there was a perception of inconsistency in that some criteria were held to be much more detailed than others; generic criteria were felt to be so wide-scoped to be of only limited applicability to specific

assessment contexts; and the lack of clarity in grade-related criteria led students not to know exactly what would be required in order to obtain a particular mark in a given assignment.

The study participants did, however, appear to be of the view that the general approach often adopted to writing assessment criteria and learning outcomes, namely that of starting with a suitable verb selected from a thesaurus-style list (see, for instance, Stefani 2009, 44–6), nonetheless yielded intelligible rubrics: some indications were received that the difference between, say, 'evaluation' and 'analysis' is at least comprehensible to them. The clearest demonstration came in the form of one respondent who proffered that 'It seems as though [the] first year is "discuss", second year "critically analyse" and third year "critically analyse and evaluate"'. (That said, the interviewee continued by noting that no credit seemed to be given for prematurely exceeding these criteria, which calls into question whether assessment criteria may be hindering students' progress, in this case, by implicitly discouraging critical engagement in the earliest year of the degree course.) Even the participant who registered uncertainty as to what such terms as 'analysis' or 'critical analysis' were intended to mean, and suggested that it would help to receive further clarification in the form of a glossary-style list of definitions, also conceded that despite vagueness in the precise meanings of individual words, it was nonetheless clear how the assessment criteria articulated the overall difference between the higher marking brackets and the lower ones.

At the same time, some evidence was uncovered that the students' understanding as to what is required of them in assessments, and in different years of their programme, derives not from regulatory documentation such as assessment criteria, so much as from their experiences of current practices: from undertaking the work itself, and from contact with peers at other stages of the same degree course. One respondent acknowledged that 'I think

it's more the actual experience of doing the coursework and learning about the new areas that we're having to learn about', commenting that 'if there are any questions, quite often people ask them of their peers and clear it up'. While some participants were confident (for whatever reason) in their knowledge of the standards expected at different academic levels, several explicitly noted that these expectations were not always articulated with sufficient clarity in the regulatory documentation itself. This highlights the nature of learning as an inherently experiential phenomenon that cannot therefore be completely encapsulated in such written texts as learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Recommendations

Here follows a series of recommendations, supplementary to the analytical discussion presented above, that have either been explicitly suggested by participants in the course of this research, or proposed by the author as possible ways of ameliorating perceived problems indicated by the students' narratives. These represent enhancements that might usefully be implemented to strengthen practice locally, and, indeed, nationally.

1. Provision of papers submitted by previous students for the benefit of current cohorts

Given the finding of this study that the formal documentation provides students with an incomplete understanding of assessment requirements which they interpret through their own experiences and those of their peers, it may be advantageous to make available (with permission) papers submitted by previous students for the benefit of the current class – as distinct from the existing practice of distributing model answers, written by the module tutor, typically only after the assessment has been handed in. One participant, for instance, noted that 'I think model answers [don't] really give us a clear picture [...] but if we actually would see a student paper [...] we would be able to relate more to that'. To trial this

recommendation, in March 2012 the author secured permission for projects submitted by two students in the previous iteration of a particular module, fully marked and annotated, to be made accessible to current students via the institution's SLE. Electronic monitoring of downloads revealed that these papers were consulted by 41% of the class (n=29). Though a comparatively modest proportion of the cohort, this result is at least indicative of demand on the part of a substantial minority.

2. Development of mechanisms to inform students how to seek further guidance on their feedback

While the interviewees were generally already aware of the possibilities for engaging in further dialogue with their tutor concerning specific feedback they have received, the present study has also revealed some variability as to how readily this might take place in practice. The provision of information on the optimal way for students to solicit additional comment on their returned work in dialogue with the associated tutor (or, in certain circumstances, another appropriate member of staff) might therefore be more explicitly and consistently embedded within the assessment and feedback process itself. As an example of such a mechanism, one of the outcomes of a consultation workshop between staff and students on assessment feedback, co-led by the author in November 2011, was the addition to the feedback proforma used across the associated programme of a line identifying the date and time at which the marker would be available to meet with the students to discuss their work (Wiley 2011).

3. Increased engagement of students with the regulatory documentation

One respondent suggested actively including students in the writing of aspects of the formal regulatory documentation such as learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Such an

initiative would function to give the students more ownership of, and investment in, their learning, as well as to immerse them in the same vocabulary as used by institutional staff, thereby closing the gap between the differing understandings of the terminology deployed. To use the words of the interviewee, this would lead to a mindset in which students say, 'I'm going to take this seriously because now I've kind of had a say in how it's going to be assessed'. However, the timeframe for seeing any revisions to the specification documents through the formal institutional approval process may prove prohibitive in at least some cases. In addition, given that this is not presently standard practice, students may not feel able or equipped to contribute to the regulatory documentation. One pilot project instigated by the author in June 2012, in which a cohort of students was asked collaboratively to write supplementary assessment criteria via a wiki set up on the institution's SLE, was aborted owing to lack of participation, with one student remarking, 'I'm not entirely sure what you mean [...] What sort of comments are you looking for?'.

Another interviewee suggested a less active form of engaging students with the institutional framework around assessment and feedback, namely, extending inductions to incorporate sessions designed to help them better understand the expectations upon them in terms of assessment as well as thoroughly preparing them for the process.

4. Implementation of greater opportunity for dialogic feedback

Following on from recommendations 2 and 3, one additional benefit of increasing the role played by face-to-face feedback, particularly in the context of formative assessments, would be to open up dialogue with students, on an individual or small-group basis, about the requirements upon them in relation to assessment as well as the intended meanings of aspects of the regulatory documentation. For example, one question frequently asked by students

about formative submissions, concerning the mark that their work might be on target to receive, could be resolved through a learning activity such as the discussion of the assessment criteria between student and tutor in order to explore the hypothetical answer. Being more upfront to students about the means by which such decisions about assessment are determined would help to manage their expectations, leading to enhanced understanding of the assessment process on the part of students, increased overall satisfaction, and, potentially, higher marks awarded. A useful extension to this practice would be to incorporate a self- or peer assessment component within the module by embedding a task in which students review submitted work along the same lines as the examiner, including some form of evaluation using the prescribed assessment criteria.

Conclusions

While a relatively modest case study of a single institution, the findings presented above resonate with work conducted elsewhere in the UK and as such, have much potential for transferability to other HEIs. Several of the recommendations made in the course of this research are consonant with those articulated in the NUS's 'Charter on Feedback & Assessment' (2010a), particularly its points pertaining to the provision of face-to-face feedback, the development of self- and peer assessment methods, and expanding inductions to include discussion of assessment and feedback processes. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) identified the promotion of learning-related dialogue as one of their influential seven principles for good (formative) feedback practice, and Nicol (2010) has more recently endorsed the development of dialogic approaches in connection with feedback. O'Donovan, Price, & Rust (2008) have advocated the necessity of explicitly educating students in assessment standards, thereby increasing their understanding of the associated processes and practices of which they ultimately themselves become a part.

At the same time, this research points towards a wider problem within the current educational infrastructure, on which further research is needed: the extent to which the ostensibly student-facing regulatory documentation is genuinely of benefit to the learner any longer, and, correspondingly, whether it is presently over-emphasized or even remains fit for purpose. The author's finding that students' understanding of assessment requirements derives more from their experiences (and those of their peers) on their degree course suggests that the formal documentation merely serves to codify processes that are essentially defined by existing practices and which may therefore only be partially understood from the documents alone. Learning outcomes have been a particular target for critical scrutiny in recent years, on grounds of whether their specificity yields an accurate reflection of the reality of students' learning (Hussey & Smith 2002) and whether the expectations they embody are consistently borne out in practice (Baughan 2012). The present regulatory framework has roots in groundbreaking work that is now over fifty years old (Bloom 1956) – as well as, more recently, a slightly misappropriated concept of 'constructive alignment' (Biggs 1996) between learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment tasks – and the time is evidently ripe for a thorough reconsideration of its continuing currency in today's rapidly changing educational climate.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that certain changes to the current educational culture may need to take place in order to make possible the students' becoming a more active part of the regulatory process with greater control of their own learning and curriculum development, as well as to implement some of the proposed enhancements to assessment and feedback practices. For example, a greater use of dialogic feedback would require revision of existing institutional policies intended to monitor the turnaround of marking within a

prescribed timeframe, which inadvertently privilege documentary modes of feedback such as the written report, whose provision is easily evidenced (in the event of a dispute) in a way not possible for face-to-face feedback even though it may be a more pedagogically advantageous means of nurturing student learning. Conversely, the reason why such concepts as 'quick and dirty' feedback found little support among the study participants may merely have been one of unfamiliarity: interviewees appeared unable to envisage the implementation of such an initiative, and a number assumed that fast-tracked feedback would have to be largely devoid of written comments. Finally, this research has also underlined the importance of including students centrally within future discussions relating to the improvement of assessment and feedback practices, rather than simply making assumptions that staff, institutional policy-makers, and other stakeholders necessarily understand their needs and preferences.

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