What is this booklet about?

This booklet has been put together by the Learning and Teaching Unit to provide staff with information and ideas about feedback.

Many of the examples in this booklet are taken from the Good Practice Database (URL opposite). This is an online and fully searchable resource that brings together ideas, innovations, and examples of good practice that have been collected from across the University through various internal audit processes. More information about the Database is provided on page 10.

Why feedback in particular?
As Saad Gul Mohammed explains in his foreword, providing excellent feedback is an institutional and national priority, not only to improve student satisfaction and attract the best new students, but more importantly to provide a formative learning experience of the highest quality.

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- page 4-5 – Eight ways to improve feedback based on current good practice at Essex (examples taken from the Good Practice Database)
- page 6 – Feature article: Why not try the ‘one-minute paper’ technique?
- page 7 – Feature article: ‘Too much description; not enough analysis’ – how helpful is your feedback?
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- page 11 – Bibliography of recommended articles, copies of which can be obtained from the library and Learning and Teaching Unit
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The need for high-quality and timely feedback is a priority for the Students’ Union. In the climate of variable top-up fees, we anticipate an increasing demand for feedback to be quicker and more qualitative.

Feedback is a key part of the learning process. It catalyses students to reflect upon their work and understand elements that require further development, as well as those in which they already have depth of knowledge. Students are keen to gain quality feedback to enrich their learning experience and progress academically.

For feedback to deliver this, it must be timely. It is essential that coursework is returned in time to allow students to modify their approach or thinking before the next assignment.

Students value the knowledge of their lecturers and greatly appreciate the feedback of markers – it is seen as an extra way to gain input from experts. The Students’ Union has the highest regard for those who teach at the University of Essex and I am grateful to have this opportunity to restate that. I hope you find this guide helpful and valuable.

Many thanks for the quality of your teaching.

Saad Gul Mohammed, VP Education
8 ways to improve feedback

■ Personalise feedback
Developed in the Law School, this approach has also been adopted by other departments. When submitting a piece of work, students are required to specify key areas where they would like to receive extra feedback. This is followed up with a short post-submission questionnaire that asks them to rate how useful the tailored feedback was, and to explain how they intend to use the advice to improve their performance in the next assignment.

■ Get students to collate feedback
Some departments have been encouraging students to keep a record of all the feedback they receive. One department in particular has embedded this practice in an assignment, whereby students are given a grid to collate and comment on the feedback they have received throughout their study. The grid is then handed in with their assignment, along with a statement of how they have used the feedback.

■ Give audio feedback
A lecturer in Biological Sciences provides audio feedback via downloadable mp3 files, which students can either listen to in transit or on campus. The mark is not revealed until the end of the recording, so students have to listen to all the feedback before they know how well they have done. Reported benefits include: saving time; overcoming issues of illegibility; providing something that is ostensibly more ‘personal’ and includes greater detail and examples; repeat listens; the ability to distinguish major from minor issues by tone of voice, etc.

■ Offer extra feedback
The School of Health and Human Sciences offers students the opportunity to have their pre-submission work proof-read to receive extra feedback. The process is highly structured and it is made clear to students what they should and should not expect from the service. Students can only submit a limited sample of their work to a consenting member of staff, at least two weeks before the deadline, and have to fill out a simple form which requires them to explain what they think is good about the draft, what they think is bad, and what they would like feedback on. Staff use this to focus their feedback.
Provide automated feedback

The Centre for Sports and Exercise Science has developed banks of weekly online tests for many of its modules. QuestionMark Perception allows lecturers to design the tests to cover a range of difficulty levels and to include feedback for different responses. If students perform well, they are automatically directed to a higher level test. Significant improvements in summative grades have been recorded since the development of the weekly online tests. There is scope for use in all disciplines: the Department of History has recently begun developing its own online tests.

Get students to reflect on feedback

The Department of History has introduced a new compulsory assessment task. First-year undergraduates are required to write a short reflection on a piece of feedback they have received, stating how helpful or unhelpful it was, and how they intend to make the most of the advice it offered. The reflection itself is then assessed and returned with feedback. In addition to helping students, this approach also provides staff with feedback on their feedback.

Get students to reflect on marking criteria

To encourage students to think about marking criteria (in effect, to give themselves feedback), some departments require students to complete and submit a mapping document in addition to their assignment. The mapping document forces students to think about marking criteria by asking them to reflect on each individual criterion in relation to their assignment. They have to rate their work, state how they feel they have done, and explain how they have satisfied each criterion. This method is particularly good for improving student responses to the National Student Survey (NSS) question that focuses on familiarity with marking criteria.

Talk about feedback

One of the first-year undergraduate courses in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies, ‘Writing Skills’, includes a class that is dedicated to the importance of using feedback effectively. Students are made aware of the formative role of feedback and are encouraged not to think of feedback as something that is negative – a list of mistakes – but something that will enable them to become reflective and continually-improving learners, and help them to get the best possible degree classification.

If you are interested in introducing a dedicated session on feedback, read the article by Whittle & Bonnett that features in the bibliography on page 11.
An increasing number of lecturers are using a technique for giving and receiving in-class feedback called the ‘one-minute paper’ (OMP) or ‘half-sheet response’. This requires students to write down, usually at the end of class, the answers to two questions: (1) What was the most important thing you learnt in today’s lecture? and (2) What question or uncertainty do you have? Students have a minute or two to write the OMPs, for which time is allocated at the end of class. The first question is intended to test their ability to rank and summarise the relative importance of what has been heard, while the second question prompts another higher order cognitive skill: the ability to ask questions. Both encourage reflection.

There is a growing body of evidence to support this technique, with the following benefits reported: it provides both staff and students (if followed up in the next class) quick and useful feedback; it assures students that their opinions and learning needs are valued; it allows immediate improvement to be made for the current (not the next) cohort; it helps to set the pace for future teaching; and, if responses are signed (anonymity has other benefits), it can be used as an attendance register.

The literature suggests that OMP is most successful when it is used regularly, but not in every lecture, so as to avoid participant fatigue. It is also crucial that lecturers provide feedback on some of the points raised, which can be done by spending the first five minutes of the next class explaining common issues. There is a time cost involved, but this can be reduced by only reviewing a sample; it can also be seen as offsetting time that would have been spent answering queries outside of class.

Systematic evidence shows that exam performance – especially of a subjective, written nature – is improved through writing regular OMPs, while student evaluations record very positive responses, including the opportunity to ask whatever you want without fear of looking stupid.

The bibliography at the end of this leaflet features an article on OMP by David Stead from the University of York, which can be accessed online from the library. Further information on OMP can be obtained from the Learning and Teaching Unit.

Reflection: What other ways are there to get feedback to and from students in large groups and regularly evaluate progress? Try the sections on Personal Response Systems (PRS) on page 10 and automated feedback on page 5.
‘Too much description; not enough analysis’ – how helpful is your feedback?

It is easy to assume – especially when giving feedback – that students understand what we are saying; that they share our understanding of the terms we use, such as ‘analyse’. However, research suggests that to avoid high levels of misunderstanding, markers’ comments need to be carefully explained, especially during the early stages of study.

This subject is addressed in an interesting article by Kate Chanock, *Comments on Essays: do students understand what tutors write?* (2000). As she puts it, ‘It is difficult to write a comment that will convey anything to a student who does not already know what it means’ (p.96). She is referring specifically to terms such as evaluate, analyse, and argument, whose meanings may seem obvious from the position of knowing, but in actual fact have ontological dimensions or ambiguity that can be difficult to define and describe.

Chanock illustrates this by citing a dictionary definition of ‘analyse’, which offers two meanings: (1) ‘resolution into simpler elements by analysing’ and (2) ‘examine minutely the constitution of’. (In the author’s own dictionary, comparable definitions were given.) As Chanock quite rightly observes, ‘If students do no more than this… they will be accused of offering nothing but description’ (p.96), description being ‘something like the opposite of analysis’ (p.97). In seeking ‘outside’ help, students may be in danger of having their misunderstanding exacerbated.

Chanock explores the reality of misunderstanding by surveying students and tutors in Humanities disciplines, asking them what they thought was meant by the common marker’s comment ‘Too much description; not enough analysis’ (the majority of participating staff admitted to having used the expression). The findings revealed significant divergence in understanding between staff and students. Furthermore, while 40% of students who received the mark reported feelings of confusion and uncertainty about its exact meaning, the substantial portion of those other students – those who claimed to find the comment helpful – actually misunderstood it.

To read this article in full, contact the Learning and Teaching Unit.

**Suggestion:** Why not have a discussion with your students about some of the key terms you use to mark and evaluate work? Test the divergence of opinion and understanding. Consider how you could use PRS (page 10)
Seven principles of feedback

You may find the following seven principles of feedback useful. They are based on an article by Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) which is listed in the bibliography at the back of this booklet. For each principle there is a suggestion for how it might be realised in practice (italicised).

Good feedback...

1. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
   
   Require students to add a page to their assignment stating how previous feedback has been incorporated

2. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
   
   Use the one-minute paper technique described on page 6

3. Helps to clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards expected)
   
   Provide opportunities for students to examine exemplars of good work

4. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
   
   Include a number of ‘action points’ along with feedback

5. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning
   
   Ensure that feedback is provided in relation to pre-defined criteria

6. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
   
   Ensure that feedback is helpful and provided as regularly as possible

7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching
   
   Require students to specify the key areas they would like feedback on
‘Teaching Circle’

The Department of Government runs a Teaching Circle for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). The Circle meet on a regular basis to explore and share experiences relating to teaching issues such as participation, essay marking, and giving feedback.

The Teaching Circle has been particularly important to the Department in achieving consistency among GTAs in terms of marks and high-quality feedback. Near the beginning of the Autumn Term, the Circle meet to discuss the grades of five sample essays that span the mark spectrum. GTAs are put into mixed groups according to experience to reach a consensus on the grade. A rapporteur from each group outlines the allocated mark and its justification.

The actual mark that was awarded is revealed and discussed. New GTAs have found this exercise very helpful prior to their first essay deadline.

Away Day on feedback

The Law School has held an Away Day for all teaching staff on the subject of feedback. The theme and objective of the Day was to achieve greater consistency in marking across subject boundaries and to improve the quality of feedback to undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Staff were given a marking exercise which led to discussion of marking criteria and an exchange of ideas on methods of giving effective feedback. Further events were held during the academic year to build on the session.

Why not have a discussion on feedback at your next departmental meeting?

Scenario Suggestion:
You lecture to a large class of undergraduates. You have just completed a topic and are about to move on to a new area. First, you want to gauge the general level of understanding, but do not have the time or resource to run seminars. What kind of techniques could you use to (i) get feedback from students and (ii) get feedback to students? Refer to this booklet for ideas.
mySkills
The University’s academic skills website (www.essex.ac.uk/myskills) is a growing resource of guidance material and exercises for students, to be used independently or as part of a module or course. The majority of the content can be easily adapted by staff for use in classes and seminars.

There is a subsection of the website dedicated to feedback. It contains a number of resources, including a video of student opinions that was recorded by an Essex graduate. In addition, there is an interactive tutorial, ‘Understanding feedback’, two advice sections, ‘Giving feedback’ and ‘Receiving feedback’, and a series of short student essays on the importance of feedback.

Good Practice Database
As mentioned at the beginning of this leaflet, the University has a searchable online Good Practice Database. It is home to many ideas, innovations, and examples of good practice that have been collected from across the University. These are also available in PDF format as a series of Smart Guides (see the Learning and Teaching Unit website, www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/resources), of which this booklet is one.

The examples that currently feature are neither definitive nor prescriptive. The database (www.essex.ac.uk/goodpractice) is designed to facilitate continuous update and improvement, and to assist in the exchange of dialogue about good practice across the University. To this end, both criticism of existing examples and the contribution of new examples are welcomed.

Personal Response Systems (PRS)
A number of departments are starting to use a learning technology that is based on the ‘Ask the Audience’ feature of Who Wants to be a Millionaire? to engage students and provide them with instant feedback on questions posed in lectures with large numbers. The technology is called PRS. Students have responded positively to the system and enjoy using it. The University now has a large number of PRS handsets that can be used by anyone. If you are interested, contact the Learning Technology Team (ltt@essex.ac.uk) for more information.
Bibliography

You may find the following articles and resources interesting. Copies of journal articles can be accessed online via the library and texts can be borrowed from the Learning and Teaching Unit:


Try also:

Higher Education Academy, Centre for Bioscience Bulletin, Subject Special on Feedback, No.22, Autumn 2007.


www.phil-race.com – for lots of feedback-related resources.
External resources

There have been a number of major national projects on feedback that have produced interesting findings and useful resources. The following two projects were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL):

■ **OLAAF (Online Assessment and Feedback)**

Provides advice and guidance on generic guidelines for authoring and embedding feedback in computer-based assessment.  
www.bbk.ac.uk/olaaf/

■ **EFEL (Effective Feedback Enhanced Learning)**

Identifies and disseminates good practice relating to assessment criteria and feedback.  
www.ntu.ac.uk/science/specialist_centres/EFEL/

There are also a number of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) that focus on assessment and feedback. They can be contacted for expert advice and are sometimes available to run sessions (the Learning and Teaching Unit often advertise sessions with guest presenters from CETLs, so look out for forthcoming events):

■ **AfL (Assessment for Learning)**

Northumbria University  
www.northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl  
Charlotte.Hann@northumbria.ac.uk

■ **ASKe (Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange)**

Oxford Brookes University  
www.business.brookes.ac.uk/ask.html  
meprice@brookes.ac.uk