



PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: How Do Students and Staff View Assessment: 'Of', 'In' or 'As' Learning?

Project type
A Research Project

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Whilst assessment can often be narrowly understood as 'of' learning, a more nuanced view is that which sees assessment as an integral part of learning and not simply a bolt-on measure of how well learning has been achieved. On this understanding assessment is a shared process between students and staff through which students become aware of their own learning needs and are supported to become independent and self-regulating learners. This project investigated the experiences of taught postgraduate students, and staff, of different forms of assessment and feedback. A team of postgraduate students from the school of Education took a leading role in all stages of the project, with support from academic staff and IAD.

Six students from the MSc Education, all of whom had taken a course on 'Learners, Learning and Teaching' were recruited to the project. They were invited to develop their own focus for research under the heading of 'assessment *as* learning'. They were asked to design their research around one or more of three suites of MSc programmes in the school, all of which had been identified as taking an innovative approach to assessment in an attempt to promote student engagement with their learning and their development as independent learners.

Of the six students who started the project, two withdrew, one because they failed to meet the criteria to progress to the dissertation stage and the other withdrew from the MSc programme for personal reasons.

Project One (Shrawani Sen): *Feedback Systems: Perceptions and Experiences of Postgraduate Students*

Shrawani interviewed 8 students and 2 tutors. She was particularly interested in the extent to which tutors' intentions in delivering feedback were reflected in the students' experiences of receiving that feedback. She found that all students felt they were clear on what feedback was and how it was to be applied. They recognized different forms of feedback and their own responsibilities in using the feedback. However they wanted a reminder from the tutors to look back on their feedback from



previous assignments. Students also wanted feedback in the form of conversation in individual face-to-face meetings, in addition to written feedback.

Tutors reported that they did offer 1:1 meetings if students wished to discuss written feedback but the students did not take up this offer, which they attributed this to shyness or student workload. Students were aware of the open invitation to talk to tutors but said they did not take up the offer because of the limited contact time they had with tutors, meaning they did not feel they knew them well enough, and they believed that tutors were too busy with other responsibilities.

Project two: (Yunying Liang) *Students' Expectations, Perceptions and Uses of Feedback and Factors Which Might Help Shape it*

The aim of this study was to investigate whether having different undergraduate backgrounds (in terms of country of study and levels of English proficiency) shaped postgraduate students' experiences of feedback.

Yunying interviewed 11 PGT students: UK native English speakers; Non UK native speakers; and Non UK non-native speakers. Key findings were that non-UK native speakers (e.g. from North America) expected positive feedback from tutors and had a greater emotional investment in feedback; they wanted to be told how well they were doing. International non-native speakers were aware of themselves as customers, not merely students in higher education. They were comfortable with challenging the academic judgement of markers and expected course tutor feedback comments to specifically point out their grammatical mistakes. Some students in this group stated that they did not always understand the feedback comments because of their level of English. Students identified lack of consistency between performance criteria and feedback comments, lack of clarity on performance criteria and a perceived deficit approach to feedback where errors were highlighted more than strengths.

Project Three (Xiaomeng Tian) *Exploring Variation in Staff and Student Perceptions of Variations in Feedback by Grade*

In this study, four tutors and two students on one MSc were interviewed. Twenty-two copies of tutors' written feedback on summative assessment were analysed according to the kinds of comments given. The study found that both tutors and students recognised the feedforward nature of feedback on summative assessment. In particular, students valued detailed, personalised feedback that included both praise and criticisms. Analysis of tutors' feedback indicates that the nature and amount of feedback provided varied across grades.

In general, tutors tend to provide more feedback for a lower grade. For these pieces of work, the tutor tended to provide more detailed advice. For a stronger piece of work, tutors aimed to challenge students' thinking and to generate a dialogue with the students about their thinking, argument, and understanding. However, for a weaker piece of work, tutors tended to focus more on how to improve a student's argument building and improve the grade. The students expressed a



preference for the more dialogic, ideas-based feedback.

Project Four (Meredith Moore) *A Reflection-Based Model of Feedback: An Evaluation of Student Perceptions*

Meredith set out to investigate an innovative, 'reflection based' form of feedback in use on one course. This approach requires students to submit self-assessment with their assignment. They then receive comments but no grade and are asked to revise their self-assessment in light of the comments received. They then meet with the tutor to discuss the assessment and feedback and finally a grade is provided.

Meredith interviewed 7 students and 3 staff who were involved with a suite of MSc programmes. Findings were that the students and staff had a shared understanding of feedback as part of a conversation. All but one of the students was very positive about the reflection model, observing that it took away the focus on the grade. All students spoke about the importance of the relationship with their tutors. This is a relatively small and discrete suite of programmes with a small staff team and multiple opportunities for relationship building because of the structure of the programmes (e.g. residential field trips). Students reported the importance of 'hearing the tutor's voice' when they read their feedback. This was contrasted with their very negative experience on one 'outside' course where their work was not marked by their tutor.

Main themes across the projects

The importance of the feedback being delivered within the context of a relationships, but in most cases relationships being difficult to establish because of other demands on time (both of students and of staff)

Contrary to what some literature suggests, the majority of PGT students are not 'expert students' arriving at university as confident independent learners.

There are clear differences in cultural expectations of feedback which, given the international profile of the PGT student community suggests there is scope for specific work to develop assessment literacy for the UK context.

All students want a balance between negative and positive comments, with the general perception that feedback tends to focus too much on pointing out errors or problems.

While more academically able students want feedback on their ideas, weaker students want detailed feedback on their writing skills. They express a strong preference for this to be delivered by their course tutor and not through another university service. For tutors, feedback of weaker work tends to be more instrumental and focused on technical aspects of writing, whereas feedback on stronger work is viewed more as a dialogue.

For assessment to be perceived by students as part of an on-going dialogue it has to be delivered by the person who did the teaching.

Dissemination

All 4 students who completed their dissertations were invited to submit a symposium for the Scottish Education Research Association annual conference. As the conference was held in November, unfortunately Yunying was unable to attend as she had returned to China. However the 3 remaining students presented their findings that were well received by conference attendees.



In addition to this symposium, we are working on an article for submission to a peer review journal to disseminate the findings. The focus of this will be the importance of the pedagogical relationship in higher education. Xiaomeng Tian has been accepted onto the PhD Education programme to further investigate this topic. Further dissemination has been through the Graduate School in Education.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

The students involved in the project had a very positive learning experience, reporting that they enjoyed the experience of being part of a research team, albeit each with their own 'angle'. This suggests that there is potential for this model of group PGT dissertation study.

The staff members involved in this study had the opportunity to reflect on their practice and also to hear about how their assessment practice is experienced by students.



How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

The findings are from 4 very small-scale studies so we need to be careful about generalisations from a study of this kind. However, similar issues arose across the 30 student interviews. The most important of these seems to be around the desire amongst students to form a relationship with their tutors, and the recognition that this takes time. This isn't necessarily time in a classroom or tutorial, but also includes time in more informal settings, having conversations around the ideas they are learning about. Some staff, particular those on smaller programmes are able to facilitate this already, but for others demands on time make this very difficult.

PGT students tend to have less timetabled contact time than UGs, partly on the assumption that they need less support and are already expert student able to learn independently. The findings from this study suggest that this is not the case and that PGT students need support to develop on their journey to 'mastersness' (QAA, 2013).

Other recommendations (with the caveat re small scale) include:

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- Where possible students' work ought to be assessed by the person who taught the course
 - Staff should be helped to be aware of different cultural expectations around assessment and feedback
 - Students need support to develop their assessment literacy
 - Expectations re independence in learning need to be made explicit to students at the point of application to PGT programmes
 - Course organisers should be encouraged to pay particular attention to clarity of performance criteria
 - Encourage markers to achieve a balance of positive and negative comments ('2 stars and a wish')
 - Develop awareness amongst markers of the emotional aspects to receiving feedback (not to suggest work is better than it is, but to take care in how comments are phrased)
 - Promoting dialogue appears particularly challenging with less able students, so additional attention needs to be focused on developing this
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