

Achieving the 3 Week Turnaround of Feedback on Student Work

Introduction

This paper provides guidance on how to respond to the University's expectation to turnaround feedback on student feedback on assessment within three weeks.

The timely turnaround of feedback increases student engagement and satisfaction with their course, improves student's ongoing work and provides an indication of educational progress to each student (Gibbs, 2010). Over the last two academic sessions the move to the 3 week turnaround of feedback on student work has been instrumental in improving student satisfaction with the promptness of feedback and has positioned the University in line with the majority of HEIs in the sector.

While the introduction of the 3 Week Turnaround has had the desired effect, making this move has proved very difficult in some areas of the University. Colleagues in LEAD and the faculties have worked together to look at what has worked and to understand how the difficulties faced by some staff can be addressed.

This briefing paper, intended for all academic staff and academic line managers, provides some background and sets out approaches that staff can use towards achieving the timely turnaround of feedback.

Background

The University's Framework for Feedback on Assessment¹ addressed inconsistency in feedback practice which, despite examples of excellent practice, put the University at 102 out of 108 in the National Student Survey in 2011. The framework set expectations for the effective production and use of feedback on student assignments in the form of protocols and principles. It established timeliness as one of four key principles, alongside feedback which is integrated within the course, feedback which is clear and focused, and feedback which is supportive and inclusive. It sets an expectation for timely feedback which is,

- normally given within three working weeks (excluding student vacation periods) of the submission deadline for the assessment;
- given in time to inform subsequent and related assessments and exams.

There are exceptional situations where this is not possible due to externally imposed constraints and the framework clarifies how exceptions should be agreed by Faculty ADADs or representatives.

¹ approved by Academic Board on the 1st May 2012

Challenges implementing the 3 Week Turnaround

The challenges staff have encountered while trying to turnaround feedback in three weeks include,

- Staff workload;
- Assignment scheduling;
- Logistics of the moderation process;
- A substantial number of assignments submitted by post;
- The working practice of part-time teaching staff and the reliance upon Associate Lecturers for assessment in some areas;
- Fieldwork impacting on staff availability;
- Conference attendance;
- University business overseas;
- Other predictable staff absences including maternity and paternity leave;
- Staff illness.

This highlights how most factors are predictable and can be managed by ensuring assessment management is prioritised. Even where there are less predictable factors academic teams should have a contingency plan in place for managing assessment and ensuring students are informed about the return of their work.

UCU offered the following good advice to staff who find it difficult to prioritise marking,

"If you are not able to meet the three week deadline because your work plan does not allow it, you should inform your line manager, normally your subject group leader, prior to the deadline. It is his/her responsibility to provide a solution to the issue... Subject group leaders who are unable to find a satisfactory solution should escalate the problem to the Head of their department.

It is open to managers to discuss your work priorities with you and tell you to leave other work to give higher priority to marking, but do ask for very clear and precise guidance on this because putting off other work may just mean that you have problems with different deadlines...

Our advice is, wherever possible, to set aside blocks of time in your diary now for the marking you will need to do, given that in most areas the majority of student hand-in dates have been set. Keep this time free from meetings or other commitments in the way that you would for teaching. But above all let your manager know if a deadline is proving unrealistic (and work out as best you can how long you will really need, working sensibly - as this is important to students in being fair in judging them and helpful in giving feedback).

from Mike Henderson (UCU branch secretary at SHU) via email to UCU members, 11th October 2013

Emerging success and good practice

Where staff have not already been returning feedback within three weeks they have mostly been successful in meeting the expectation. A review of how this has been achieved highlights how three general strategies have been used:

- **Addition** - trying to do more (Stasis)
- **Modification** - redesigning aspects of how feedback is managed and delivered (Enhancement)
- **Redefinition** - creating a new way of assessing and providing feedback (Transformation)

Strategies that depend upon addition are neither reasonable nor sustainable and are more likely to adversely impact on the quality of the student experience. This paper now sets out ideas generated by staff from all faculties and approaches found at other universities that support the modification and redefinition of practice. Some of the ideas can be adopted by academic practitioners, while others require the attention of managers.

Innovation is needed to enable effective timely practice. Innovation sits on a continuum of enhancement and transformation comes from modifying existing practice to improve methods or streamline processes or from redefining practice. The latter can be difficult to achieve when it involves bringing colleagues on board or when it changes approved course documentation and it can be helpful, therefore, to seek support from colleagues with LTA or Quality roles to achieve this.

High level actions

University and Faculty managers need to consider,

- **Administrative support** - how administrative support can be provided for mark recording, photocopying materials for external examiners, and printing off and sorting out feedback sheets for external examiners to allow staff to focus on academic quality.
- **Technology-Enhanced Assessment** - how technology can be used to speed up marking and feedback processes, for example by using electronic marking, oral feedback on Blackboard, feedback grids and banks of feedback statements, or by evaluating and developing staff IT skills to improve administration.
- **Streamline moderation** - how moderation can be made more manageable without reducing its quality, for example by considering online moderation, reducing the number of scripts used, staff development, and having clear and consistent methods for moderation.
- **Postal and extension policy** - by reviewing the regulations to ensure postal submissions and extensions do not inadvertently and unnecessarily disrupt marking schedules.
- **The marking load** - how marking loads are managed in relation to academic work planning so that realistic time allocation is made for marking and this is properly communicated and supported by line managers.
- **Assessment bunching** - how the processes underpinning curriculum design and approval encourage innovation that redefines the role of assessment so that it attains a formative-summative pattern and avoids 'bunching' across modules making it more meaningful and useful to staff and students.

Academic management

Course Leaders, academic line managers and Quality leads need to consider,

- **Good planning** - plan ahead, ensure that all the processes involved are structured and that communications to markers are clear.
- **Blocking out time for marking** - stop other activities to prioritise marking by setting aside blocks of time which are free of other activities including teaching and meetings.
- **Reviewing the method of assessment** - attention needs to be paid to the assessment context to ensure that appropriate methods are used. Assessment should be effective by being designed so that it is pedagogically principled, suited to learning outcomes and efficient.
- **Streamlining the processes for recording assessment** - comments from staff highlighted the laborious nature of entering marks into Grade Centre, printing out Excel spreadsheets and then sending these for inputting to SI by administrative staff.

Academic practice

During the qualitative review staff at Sheffield Hallam shared some of the methods they had developed to enhance feedback practice towards achieving the three week turnaround. These were discussed by 13 staff produced by QESS with contributions from all faculties, 2013 during three focus groups and several short interviews conducted by QESS for this review. The main points are listed here.

- **Employ a departmental standardised feedback form** - In HWB Sport an initiative was carried out, supported by the departmental LTA lead, to employ a standardised feedback form for summative assessments. Its purpose was to establish a minimum expectation for producing feedback on student work and to create consistency throughout the department. This feedback form requires the marker to provide feedback which highlights students strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement. The

standardised form can be adjusted to make it more suitable for different assessment types. Initial findings from a student evaluation of this approach were positive.

- **Peer supported development through an 'LTA Coffee Club'** - One department initiated a monthly informal event to offer colleagues a chance to share what they do. It created a space for staff to talk about such things as the NUS Charter on Feedback and Assessment. The LTA Coffee Club is the basis for an emerging community of practice for all teaching staff within the department.
- **Course-based 'Patchwork Text' principles tying together course assessments** – Patchwork text principles (Scoggins and Winter, 1999; Winter, 2003²) were used to develop a 'continuous improvement' approach to learning by linking all five modules on a course resulting in a 7000-word patchwork text dissertation. (It provides an example of a course-centred assessment approach which is discussed below).
- **Portfolio work** – the rationale for using the portfolio assessment is to value “...the student's journey.” The aim of the portfolio is to document the student's learning process and involves them in reflecting on and then applying prior feedback. Five tutors, including the student's personal tutor, mark the portfolio. The process takes up to a week for the 45 students in this example and is common practice in Architecture.
- **Crits** - This type of assessment is based upon the student's presentation of their work and incorporates instant feedback from tutors, peers, clients and, in some cases, the public. Used by studio-based disciplines in particular, the students learn by responding to suggestions and criticism. This, therefore, is an example of authentic assessment in which feedback is integrated and rich. “We are not training only academics, but architects to go into industry.” Another colleague in an 80 credit module in an arts-based subject area expressed her commitment to the use of crits for assessment. “We see our students every week for feedback as a group. Each student is allocated a crit leader. I have about 20 students in my crit group. In each crit, students comment on work just as much as staff.” Verbal feedback is key is presented quickly and is part of a trustful, dialogic approach to assessment and feedback which helps to foster a strong sense of professional identity. This leads to the development of a supportive and critical culture in which students, who work in studios within the university, are always available and ready to give feedback on each other's work.
- **Audio feedback and feedback grids** - Staff members reported on their use of audio feedback in marking essays and technical reports. The tutor in this study who described this method had not chosen it with the three week turnaround in mind, but because he thought it would be quicker than written feedback. He did some calculations and he estimates that students receive about 400-600 words. He finds it easy to do, and he thinks it is much more meaningful for the student. He reads up the work once, establishes a mark according to each of the criteria and then he just presses the record button: “I normally highlight 2-3 things that I want to give feedback on.” He indicated how it breaks up the monotony of marking. This is noted in the literature on audio feedback and is significant because it positively affects the quality of the feedback given. The tutor explained that marking first-year scripts of 2,000 words can be challenging but he explained that he can mark up to 6 scripts an hour using audio feedback. He mentioned another colleague who uses audio feedback and then uses software to transcribe feedback. Other staff have reported how they use audio feedback to provide critical comments in a supportive way alongside feedback grids in which generic comments, aligned to criteria, can be circled and further annotated.
- **Ensuring quality in marking** – the member of staff blocks out time in her diary for marking. An example assignment would be an 8 page report including diagrams. It is a critical analysis. She provides written feedback for reports (n=60 students). She initially writes feedback in pencil, and always re-reads her feedback. A marking grid is used along with one page of written feedback with an

² The method is made up of a variety of fairly short pieces of writing, as varied as possible and covering the learning objectives, each of which is complete in itself. Together they create a unified whole once 'stitched together' which happens gradually during the course. At the end of the course, students add a reflexive commentary to the short pieces they have already written.

action plan. The tutor said that 'trust' is needed in providing feedback to students and that feedback is a two-way interaction. She usually marks 15 scripts a day. The staff member has considered using audio and screencast feedback for students, but feels more confident using pencil. She informs students that scripts will be returned within three weeks.

- **Instant feedback in-class assessment** - a member of staff described how on a first-year module he set students 20 bite-size assessments with feedback given, if not in the class, within 7 days. On occasions when he has not had enough time, he would ask students to bring their work and he would sit next to them and give them feedback right then and there. He believes that it is important to provide feedback to students when it matters. He said, "I think we need to teach our students what to do with feedback."
- **Adaptive release** - One colleague shared that in one of his modules there was a test in January. He would mark the test, but not write the numbers on their script. He recorded the mark somewhere else. At the start of the new semester in the first tutorial, he would give them the solutions of the test and tell students that he will not be giving marks for a week. Students attempt to re-do the test to see how well they did on test because they are eager to know how they did.
- **Instant feedback through Blackboard online assessment** - One colleague shared an example of a method of assessment that incorporates the use of multiple choice questionnaires. He indicated that this use of summative assessment removes the administrative burden associated with booking rooms and invigilators for exams. In addition to having the exam as an open-book assessment, the student is able to complete the exam in her/his own time. Each student is given a different set of questions (from a pool of 300 questions), which addresses the potential for cheating. This method uses Blackboard's adaptive release and implements in-module retrieval with instantaneous marks and feedback from a feedback bank of comments.

Strategies and methods for innovation

Ongoing work by a University-wide Assessment Group to produce an Assessment Handbook for the University has generated much thinking, some of which pulls together existing good practice from within the University and from across the sector.

Reducing the burden

- Reduce the number of summative tasks – and increase the amount of formative activity;
- Reduce the word count – review summative writing tasks and decide if the word count can be reduced;
- Reduce the variety of assessment types within a course – variety is important for engagement and for inclusivity, but the introduction of and support for each type has an overhead;
- Reduce complexity by using assessment grids or rubrics. Highlighting standard generic responses in a matrix and then complementing this with more in depth, personal written or audio feedback means the feedback on a task can both cover the breadth of the outcomes and focus on pertinent detail for individuals.
- Reduce the amount of time you write the same things – use comment banks of common statements stored, for example, in spreadsheet macros.
- Reduce the need for extensive general feedback on tasks by 'front loading' – give plenty of feedback on formative activities prior to summative assessments or involve self and peer feedback in the lead up to assessment. Then prioritise individual feedback on summative tasks.
- Increase online assessment– online assessment can reduce administration and speed up the return of feedback, make it more accessible to students and encourage student feedback archiving.

Thinking ahead

- **Prioritisation** - Estimating how much time the production of feedback will take and then prioritising this. Staff should agree with line managers at the outset of the academic year that other commitments do not call upon the designated time for marking.
- **Feedback first** - Writing assessment criteria clearly and at the same time creating a range of generic feedback statements for each criterion can be helpful. These can be adapted and appended as necessary to personalise the feedback.
- **Pre-moderation** - Moderating marking by preparing and rehearsing marking judgments, techniques and styles with colleagues beforehand can be helpful. You can do this using examples from previous years. This leads to consistency and marking fluency.
- **Contingency** - Managing risks by developing contingency plans at the outset of the academic year so that if critical staff involved in marking fall ill leaves course teams with a response plan in place.

Smart and personalized

- **Generic+** - Based upon a sample of student work create a range of generic feedback stems. Producing personalised feedback now only requires the marker to either qualify a generic statement or add personal points to the generic stem messages. Explain this to students so they can see the benefits of this generic/personal approach. This can also help students to understand how they are progressing in relation to their peers and can help to establish course expectations.
- **Focused on action** - Good feedback should result in the learner taking some action. Focus on giving clear feedback and action statements. Reduce the range of feedback given and avoid overloading the student with too many comments or too much detail.

Crafting a holistic approach to feedback

- **Joined up feedback** - Create a feedback strategy for each task. Providing very detailed, discursive feedback that addresses content, style, skills and attributes for every piece of work is very demanding. With a keen eye on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria, design a complementary set of feedback methods for use across activities and tasks in the course. This may result in deep, detailed and formative feedback for activities that work in balance with short, focused and decisive feedback on summative tasks. (See also: course-centred assessment, portfolio assessment, and Patchwork Text, for example).

Longitudinal feedback

When feedback works really well it is part of an ongoing, dialogic process. There are many things you can put in place leading up to the assessment that will make the production of feedback simpler. Here are a few:

- Build upon feedback given on or created during formative activities. Formative feedback can take many forms and may be generated following informal or formal student-tutor discussions, peer feedback activities, or as a result of student self-regulated reflection, etc. Use this as the basis for brief feedback on the summative task.
- Reflective self-regulated feedback statements can be written against the assessment criteria by the student themselves or their peers for sign off or adjustment by the marker.
- Use a negotiated feedback strategy – give generic feedback to all students and complement this with focused personalised feedback against learning priorities determined by each student prior to the task through negotiation. In this way students are more likely to engage with all the feedback as it will be seen to be more clearly of direct benefit to them.

Course-centred assessment

Feedback, in its many forms, is central to good, interactive teaching and, from the student's perspective, good learning practice. It permeates practice. Course-centred assessment takes account of this and results in integrated approaches to giving and using feedback. Course-centred assessment includes any approach to assessment which connects concurrent or future modules, or other formative experiences, to make assessment and feedback richer, more relevant and more rewarding. It challenges the assumption that assessment tasks need to be constrained by modularity, and better aligns with course-level learning outcomes.

Leading innovators in assessment practice have been developing and promoting the benefits of this approach. Course-Centred Assessment is sometimes called Programme Level Assessment, Programme Focussed Assessment, Course-based Assessment, Synoptic Assessment or Course-Centred Assessment. T, In the UK TESTA (Gibbs), PASS (McDowell, 2012), ESCAPE (Russell & Bygate, 2010), ASKe (Price et al., 2012) are some of the most notable groupings recognised in this area.

Moving forward - development opportunities and resources

Good practice in Assessment sessions are regularly offered in the University's CPD Programme (<https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/inspire>). Development sessions can be arranged for subject groups to work with colleagues to apply some of the ideas outlined here. Contact your Faculty Head of LTA in the first instance.

The University has developed a Feedback Toolkit resource-base to inform and share good practice in the design of feedback on assessment. It brings together a collection of practical tools, case studies, links to good sources of information hosted externally and annotated bibliographies on assessment and feedback.

The toolkit is refreshed with new useful content as it becomes available.
(<https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/feedbacktoolkit/>)

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