Edinburgh Napier
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DLTE
Department of
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Enhancement

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Helping students to benefit from feedback on exams

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What's the problem?

Since the NUS held their Feedback Amnesty in 2012, Student Unions and Student Associations across the UK have held campaigns seeking feedback on exams (NUS, 2014). However, all Higher Education institutions need to balance the potential benefit to students and the predictable enormous workload entailed relative to current UK practice, hence finding pragmatic and manageable approaches is of paramount importance in this area of assessment and feedback practice.

Why is it important to consider the pragmatics?

Feedback is most beneficial when it can impact on future performance, so students need time, motivation and opportunity to engage with feedback information and act upon it (Boud & Molloy, 2013). This means that any information that students receive should 'feed forward' into future assignments. Given the end-point nature of exams, which tend to focus on testing achievement rather than scaffolding future learning, some universities have decided to provide feedback on exams only for continuing students. However, it is good practice to enable students to review their own performance (Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013) and to gain an understanding of why and how the marks are awarded in exams, so that, faced with similar tasks or challenges in the future, students are suitably primed to prepare judiciously and achieve their best (Scoles, Huxham, & McArthur, 2013).

What practical options might there be?

In some nations, feedback on exams is the norm (for example the Netherlands) but the majority of nations don't do so routinely. A rough-and-ready survey of a dozen UK universities has suggested the following pragmatic options are used to help students benefit from feedback in relation to exams. The possibilities are presented below in order to offer a basis for programme teams to consider and adapt for use in their own local contexts.

Option 1

Detailed written feedback available on all exams. This is not normally considered viable. We know of no university in the UK that offers this. The choice of time-constrained exams as a means of assessment is often made for cost effectiveness and efficiency and these benefits are largely removed if extensive written feedback is required on exam scripts.

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Option 2

Dedicated exam feedback sessions during which time exam scripts might be made available for scrutiny and discussion but are not to be removed nor copied. Assessors are available for question and answer opportunities, either individually or collectively.

Option 3

General feedback about exam performance provided post-hoc on the overall cohort performance, with qualitative comments typically identifying good practice and common errors. In this option the feedback comments can be understood without seeing the script. This is the most common approach we identified and has been successfully used, for example, by Leeds Beckett University and by Manchester University's School of Computer Science. The feedback can be oral (and made available in a clearly timetabled face-to-face session), or text-based (and provided on the VLE or similar). Text-based feedback can be in the form of 'expanded' model answers, (akin to the exploded text with annotations we often find on diagrams which accompany products which require self-assembly), so that the rationale for why marks were awarded is central to the process. Enabling students to see the average mark of the group and the distribution of marks can help students contextualise their own work.

Other approaches include publishing the exam questions in full, year-on-year, accompanied by the markers' breakdown summary of a cohort's responses, pointing out the features of good answers and common mistakes on a question-by-question basis. This explanation, and the capacity for students to see the types of questions that former year-groups have been expected to tackle, means that current students can see and learn from previous cohorts' attempts at tackling questions in their subject area, as well as getting general feedback on their own exam performance. The disadvantage of this method is that the same questions cannot then be used for future exams, but this is not best practice in any case.

Option 4

Feedback on request by students who would like one-to-one support, where they can scrutinise the breakdown of the marks and have the rationale explained to them. This is rarely used in UK universities but when it is offered it is usually taken up by tiny numbers of students, so it can potentially satisfy an important need. It is worth noting that in such cases, students should be clear that feedback on exams can not be considered as a basis for a re-mark or the change of the grade awarded, because in most institutions, the regulations state that students may only challenge the fairness of the approach (e.g. they could legitimately challenge incorrect adding up of marks) but may not usually question the professional or academic judgement of the assessors.

Option 5

Using exemplars and feedforward on specimen answers. This option is often highly valued by students using exemplars to illustrate effective satisfactory and ineffective approaches to the types of exam questions that will be asked, but doing this well in advance of students sitting the exam itself. This can help students realise the level at

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which they are expected to work so that they can get to grips with the material they need to and adjust their learning strategies accordingly in the light of the anticipatory feedback they derive from seeing and, ideally, analysing and discussing, former students' specimen answers (see DLTE Quick Guide #9). Students can be asked to evaluate a range of exemplar answers of diverse quality as a means of getting their heads around appropriate criteria and as part of revision sessions. Exemplars can usefully illustrate the feedback comments which tutors often make in the relevant subject domain, thus helping students to gain essential feedforward guidance before tackling their own exam. Feedback comments on coursework assignments can also sometimes offer useful general pointers about improving similar skills and techniques on work undertaken under exam conditions.

Option 6

Engaging students with criteria and standards in the subject domain. It can be useful prior to the exam to engage students fully with appropriate criteria and standards by asking students to reflect on the content so far, then inviting them to design an exam paper that can be set for next year's students. Requiring them to justify and explain their choice of questions and helping them to practice tackling each others' questions, with peer feedback, can help open up productive feedback dialogues which can inform their future exam performances.

Key takeaways

Feedback information is only of value if students have chance to comprehend, internally process and put the information into practice. Arguably the best use of our resources is, therefore, to prioritise feedback discussions which help students to develop a 'nose' for quality answers *before* they sit an exam, by, for instance, engaging them actively with thinking critically about, and practising, the types of questions they need to prepare themselves to face. Accordingly, in exploring how to offer feedback to students on their exam performance, we need to temper our inevitable desire to do everything we can to help and to respond to their requests, with practical considerations of what is manageable.

References

Boud, D. & Molloy, E. (2013). Rethinking models of feedback for learning: the challenge of design. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *38*(6), 698–712.

NUS (2014). Assessment and feedback benchmarking tool https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/assessment-and-feedback-benchmarking-tool (accessed 27 March 2018).

Sambell, K., McDowell, L., & Montgomery, C. (2013). *Assessment for learning in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Scoles, J., Huxham, M., & McArthur, J. (2013). No longer exempt from good practice: using exemplars to close the feedback gap for exams. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *38*(6), 631–645.

[University guidance relating to governance issues around student access to their exam scripts can be found at: https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/secretary/governance/DataProtection/CodeofPractice/Pages/Examination.aspx] (accessed 27 March 2018)

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