PFAAF
Programme-Focused Approach
to Assessment and Feedback

What can I do right now to enhance assessment and feedback on my module?

Across the Higher Education sector, assessment and feedback is consistently the area with which students are least satisfied, yet it takes up so much student and staff time. The University's Programme Focused Approach to Assessment and Feedback (PFAAF) project is a change-initiative designed to facilitate enhancements in assessment and feedback practices here at Edinburgh Napier. It will run through to August 2017. But what can you do right now? Here are some ideas for you to consider, to talk about with your programme and module team colleagues and with your students. If you are doing them already and they are working, let us know so we can share good practice across the University. Before reading on, keep in mind that what follows are ideas: we're not suggesting that you implement all of them. What might work best for you and your students?

1. Improve routine communication with students

   One of the easiest ways to improve student satisfaction is to improve simple communications with students and ensure that programme assessments are well organised (Langan, Dunleavy, & Fielding, 2013). Even if you cannot change your module, you can make things easier for students with little effort:

   - Create a 'countdown clock' for the assessment on Moodle. This is especially welcomed by students working in different time zones.

   - Set calendar events on Outlook and 'invite' students to them so they know exactly where and when to submit. Give at least 4 weeks' notice of summative assessment tasks.

   - Ensure all details are readily available: word count, submission time, formatting expectations, etc. should all be online and easy to find. Watch out for any inconsistencies between versions of handbooks and other communications such as assessment briefs.

   - Stick to deadlines as much as possible – extensions can annoy students since it feels unfair to those who have managed their time.

   - Be clear about the nature and purpose of all feedback.

- Give a specific date when feedback is due, not just 'within three working weeks', and detail how students will get their feedback.

- Enable written work to be submitted electronically and take time to show students how the systems work. Create templates for use in Word to help with consistent presentation.

- Have submission deadlines in mid-afternoon: technical problems are less dramatic at 3pm than at midnight.

- Make sure students know who to contact if their tutor is unavailable.

- Have a clear email policy on response times, ideally consistent with how quickly you expect students to respond to your messages. Consider using Virtual Office Hours.

2. Speed up feedback

Edinburgh Napier's student charter commits to feedback within 3 working weeks for assignments and 5 working weeks for exams. Students tell us that this is not consistently met. Worse still, expectations across the sector are increasing: two weeks is now common, and there are even examples of next-day feedback despite cohorts of over 400 students (Race, 2014). The good news is that meeting demands for more speed can free up tutor time and will make us focus on smaller amounts of feedback with more impact (Sykes, Morrison, & Gray, 2015).

- Use taught sessions for feedback, such as marking students' work 'live' in tutorials.

- Use audio recording or screencasting to create oral feedback.

- Arrange assessment deadlines to avoid bottlenecks in tutor workload.

- Ask students to pose specific questions for their feedback.

- Agree a particular focus for feedback on some assessments. For example, after the first trimester stop giving feedback on referencing or grammar. Groups might also negotiate feedback priorities. For example, feedback on one task might focus exclusively on clarity of argument, another might focus exclusively on use of literature.

- Compile feedback from the previous cohort and release it to students before they submit their work: make it clear that you will not give individual feedback on these points. You could return a highlighted version after submission to show which comments still apply.

- Schedule time for feedback: it is one of the most important parts of our job as academics, so the delivery of content may have to be re-thought.

- Get global feedback out to students early. You might even be able to predict the feedback you expect to give, which would be an interesting prompt for discussion after students have submitted.

- Make sure you are just giving feedback aimed at students: mark justification and comments for the external examiner are much less important than student learning. An external

examiner wants to see good practice, there is no reason to give worse feedback to students to try please examiners.

- Use in-class voting technology to quickly check understanding and focus feedback to the group.

- Liven up discussion boards by using a mixture of text and audio to encourage peer feedback – check out http://gong.ust.hk/

- Request feedback on your feedback, challenging students to make specific requests for future feedback.

3.   Improve the status of formative assessment

Formative assessment will engage students with higher quality feedback sooner and distribute everyone's workload more evenly – this is why the University has now agreed and approved a definition of formative feedback. However, students might not immediately see the importance of formative assessment since it is not credit bearing.

- Emphasise that formative assessment will be used to amend your teaching plan for the rest of the trimester, so you need accurate information on student learning.

- Highlight the benefits of formative assessment to students: it can help them to understand assessment criteria, clarify their thinking, and gain peer feedback.

- Don't justify everything in terms of grades: emphasise how a formative assessment will contribute to developing skills, for example those concerned with employability.

- Try engage students with the principle of formative assessment, promoting its effective learning purpose rather than the link to "generating grades" (Boud, 2010, p.6).

- Break the process of preparing for a summative assessment into smaller formative tasks and focus feedback on these instead of waiting until the end of the module. For example, break preparation into literature searching, evaluating sources, planning structure, etc. Some of this work can be done in groups. Starting with students self-evaluating how they usually prepare for summative assignments should help to convince them that more structure would help!

- Coach students in asking the right questions. A useful formative task could be deciding which questions the groups wants a tutor to focus on during the next class.

- Analyse a selection of feedback from the previous cohort. Students should appreciate the chance to look for tips in advance, giving a good opportunity to draw out any implicit tutor expectations.

- Take some time to discuss poorly chosen sources (especially if they were used the previous year). What makes one source dated while another is seminal? Why is Wikipedia not

recommended as a source? How can we check for news source bias? Task groups of students to offer corrections or alternatives to lower quality sources.

- Create a bank of multiple choice questions. These can include automatic feedback online. Encourage students to participate by emphasising that you will use responses diagnostically when deciding the focus of taught sessions. This shifts the focus from trying to get the right answer to thinking carefully about what students already know or need help with.

- Ask students to bring in feedback from other modules and work in groups to identify common themes. These could become study groups as students find ways to help each other.

- Get students to summarise assessment criteria or mark an exemplar. This is a powerful way to expose misunderstandings or tacit expectations.

- Emphasise the value of your module by asking students to draft their assessment response before the module begins: what can they not do now but will be able to do by the end?

4.   Your students should be working harder than you are

It's worth considering that increasing the amount of feedback we give students is only worthwhile if students use it to critique and improve their own work (Hounsell, 2003). For example, students will often focus on too strict an interpretation of criteria and technical aspects of assessments and miss more holistic consideration. This can be a difficult perception to change. However, talking through models and exemplars from previous years is a highly effective way of helping students to see where their understanding of what good work looks like is too limited. This kind of exercise is therefore valuable for training students to generate their own feedback, emphasising that they are partners in their own education, not consumers.

More ideas

The majority of ideas in this guide come from Bloxham & Boyd (2007), Falchikov & Boud (2007), and section 3 of Carless, Joughin, & Liu (2006). Those with the ability to make structural changes sooner might also benefit from Carless (2015).

References and recommended reading

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