STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

A Learning & Teaching Research Collaboration
The Feedback Journey - Accessibility and Engagement

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1. Executive Summary

This project aims to address students' understanding and engagement with feedback on their formative and summative assessments. Although, the majority of feedback may be satisfactory, our research has also found that many students are seeking more guidance on how to improve particular aspects of their assessments. We have considered that there is a limit in terms of the support that can be provided due to the large capacity of students. Thus, this project has accounted for the needs of both the teacher and student. Our survey responses have enabled us to suggest solutions to the issue of feedback whereby it can be made more effective for students, without being costly for teachers. Being students ourselves, the objective of this project was motivational. Most of us have had experiences where we have struggled to engage with or have misunderstood feedback for seemingly common reasons. Wanting to improve the communication between tutor and student, this project has gathered data through survey responses providing us with answers as to the most common reasons why students have struggled with their feedback.

When deciding the method to use to gather the data required for our project we found that an online survey proposed the best method amidst the Coronavirus pandemic. The student co-creators discussed their personal experiences with feedback, finding shared experiences whereby they struggled to engage. After consulting peers and finding similar issues, collectively, the group analysed the reasons deciding where the problem arose in the scenarios; with the tutor or student. Deciphering through these experiences and selecting examples where the tutor could have provided feedback in a different manner allowed us to start brainstorming the appropriate questions for our survey that would provoke reasonable and helpful responses.

Although positive, the survey confirmed that the 'feedback journey' must be addressed for students to be able to effectively reflect and progress in their educational experiences. However, it is not a simple aspect of education to rectify and requires cooperation from both staff and students. As a result of the analysis of the data we collected, we agreed on some base lines which aim to improve students' understanding and engagement with feedback. The base lines have been presented and discussed with academic staff and will be implemented in the core modules at level 4 and 5.

We did not receive as many responses to our survey as desired and due to the importance of this subject matter, we have found that the project requires a continuation in order to gather more research and to reflect and build on the solutions that we have provided. In addition, we would like to explore how technology can support the improved student journey further by collecting feedback on all assessments for an individual student so that they can reflect on this more effectively.

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2. Background and Aims

This project is important because it can provide a strategy that is designed to improve student performance. Feedback can "improve a student's confidence, self-awareness and enthusiasm for learning. Effective feedback during the first year in university can aid the transition to higher education and may support student retention" (Reading.ac.uk, 2019). If student feedback literacy is improved and feedback is produced according to the needs of the average student, students are more likely to engage with the feedback received. Thus, this strategy can improve the quality of student work by allowing it to correlate with teachers' comments more effectively, increasing assessment grades. We decided that we needed to ask a large number of students very specific questions in order to analyse the root of the most common issues.

As feedback should correlate with the grading criteria, it was crucial to find out whether students knew what this was and where to find it. Further, as the student co-creators had expressed that there can be difficulty in interpreting feedback, we needed to find out whether other students understood the terminology used in the grading criteria. With the same objective, we also needed to know if students knew what a rubric was, where to find it and if they understood it, as this was also designed to help with feedback and development.

In our discussions amongst the group we also analysed the format in which the feedback is given and whether this poses difficulty for students. We wanted to find out whether students preferred feedback in an audio or written format, what length and whether headings would be useful to break down the feedback into sections, making it easier to digest.

At times communication between tutor and student can be tenuous and we wanted to see how many students understand what is expected from their development across their module. This correlates with the feedback process, because if a student does not know what progress they are expected to show in their module, they will be less likely to demonstrate progression and may have difficulty in understanding feedback and its underlying objective.

3. Methods

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, we decided that an online survey accompanied with an incentive would give us the most accurate data for student views on feedback. We considered qualitative interviews via Skype or platforms like such, however, this would not have gathered as many responses. Considering the personal

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nature of feedback, we needed a large number of responses to draw out the most common issues. We considered ethical issues and provided information about the survey that participants could read before completing the survey. Further, we allowed them to choose whether they wanted to submit their personal details and in turn enter the competition or to remain anonymous. Only one person chose to remain anonymous.

The survey we created held carefully articulated questions upon which we took time deciding. This was to get to the root of the issue(s), to prevent inappropriate responses and to encourage honesty. We incorporated open answers and gave room for comments that would provide us with detail and thus more accuracy. Further an optional question asked them to submit an example of good feedback they have received and another question asked them to describe good feedback. Rewardingly we received detailed answers, 5 of which were awarded with a £25 Amazon voucher. Having these questions gave us a lot of accuracy highlighting the root issues and also helped us to rule out participant suggestions that held unreasonable expectations for a very personal approach.

The survey was successful and collected 55 responses, 16 of which were first year students, 24 were second year, 12 were third year and 3 were fourth year, all were enrolled on to a law course. We analysed the responses using google forms as the technology allowed us to view the responses by question, the individual or by a summary, which helped us immensely in choosing the winners for the competition and in deciphering the information.

4. Results

The most common assessment undertaken by the participants were essays; 54 out of 55 people had undertaken an essay assessment. Further, 51 people had undertaken a problem question and 49 people had done multiple choice questions. On the other end of the scale, 26 people had done presentation assessments and only 1 had done mooting.

According to the survey, 28 participants responded that they are satisfied with the feedback from their formative and summative assessments, 17 were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 10 were unsatisfied. This was an unexpected and overall a positive response to feedback. Furthermore, the majority of students stated that their feedback is consistent within each module and that they understood the wording of the feedback. Most of the students were also able to recall an example of 'good feedback' from one of their modules. However, the survey question "how can feedback be more effective" evoked 40 responses, the majority of which wanting feedback to be more specific and detailed. The general feel from the responses seems as though students

are wanting more guidance on how they could have done better, thus more focus on improvement rather than critiques. When the students were asked how the format of feedback could be improved, the majority wanted headings so as to break down the feedback making it easier to understand.

In terms of additional feedback, 26 students did not know how to access this. This means that teachers should make this more available to students as it is a tool that is able to support students further. Although 24 students answered that most of their teachers had explained what was expected from their development within their modules, there remains a need for consistency as 30 stated that only some of their teachers had and 1 said that none of them had.

The grading criteria and the rubric questions provoked slightly different responses to the feedback. Although 34 students responded that they knew where to find the grading criteria for most of their modules, the question on the terminology of the grading criteria created more dispersed responses: 7 students answered that they understood the terminology of the grading criteria every time, 23 answered most of the time, 11 answered sometimes, 8 answered not a lot of the time and 6 answered never.

Further, 24 students stated that they have not used rubrics in their assessments and 12 only for some. 25 students did not know where to find the rubrics for their assessments and 13 only for some. A lot of students did not know what the rubric was or found it unhelpful in understanding feedback and a clear majority stated that they did not find it useful.

5. Discussion

Students' understanding and engagement with feedback is essential in order to effectively reflect on their student journey. As the feedback journey consists of several key elements such as learning outcomes, the introduction of grading criteria and their terminology, rubrics and the terminology and presentation of feedback itself, we centered the survey questions around these areas in order to find the common problems with feedback.

The next step was to gather students' feedback and analyse them to see where we can make a change. We found that 55 is a relatively small sample size which does not allow us to draw any definite conclusions on the rest of the law school. Despite this limitation, the trend was more positive than negative which indicates that the current state of feedback as a learning tool is "ok". The survey has allowed the participants to indicate that they would benefit from more structure in the feedback they receive (the use of "headings" came up as a solution on several occasions) and more detail and guidance with a shift of focus from critiques to improvements.

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In addition, the rubric and grading criteria did not receive such a positive response and showed us that the terminology may need to be broken down to improve students' understanding. Further, the rubric needs to be made more accessible and possibly reviewed so as to make it helpful in students' understanding of feedback and useful for assessments.

The aim of the survey was to understand the effectiveness of feedback as a learning tool however the data collected only showed that there was not **one** single principal issue to be solved but rather several small ones. When the project resumes next year, we will be able to receive more information regarding the fundamental issues with feedback and obtain helpful information about the base lines that will be introduced during the first semester of next academic year.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

As Graduate Digital Learning Assistants we explored the tools and technologies available on Blackboard to support the future aims of the project. Blackboard e-portfolio may prove helpful in supporting the overall feedback journey. It has the potential to be used to store assessment feedback from different modules and be available to students in successive years. To support better understanding of the rubric and assessment criteria, digital tools such as Panopto screencast and Voicethread can be used as alternative media (Thompson and Lee, 2012), and peer-to-peer marking and the Learning Journal can be used for reflective exercises. For these tools to be most impactful to student learning, it is important to really understand student needs and challenges with regards to their feedback journey, and that is something that this co-creator project has begun to provide some insight to.

We came to the conclusion that rubrics should be used for all assessments aligned with the assessment criteria and that they need to be discussed during the start of a module and towards the end where it can be linked to examples of past assessments (also a baseline in itself) and the formative assessment. The group also concluded that there should be an opportunity for students to engage with the assessment criteria/rubrics actively. Additionally, we agreed on using headings for feedback that follow the rubric and can be used to provide the student with an example of what was good about it and how it can be improved. Moreover, a second survey about the baselines/rubrics will be distributed next academic year to follow up with the project. Our aim for next year is to establish an outline that records the student journey in relation to the learning outcomes, modules & assessments, as well as the feedback presentation and terminology used. In addition to exploring how technology can support this by collecting feedback on all assessments for an individual student.

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7. Dissemination

We presented our findings and project at a Law School Away Day on Monday 5th July 2021. The base lines were presented and explained to staff towards the end of our presentation by the School's LT Director.

In addition, our report will be circulated to all of the Westminster law school staff as the improvement of feedback is contingent on their cooperation. An announcement will be made in the Law School's monthly online journal ""lawnews". The report will also be made available to anyone interested on the current state of the feedback journey and the steps being made by the Law School to improve the student experience.

The report could also be made available to students, as those interested may want to respond to the report. This could increase our sample of student opinions and provide us with a wider base of research. In addition, next year's student module representatives will be asked to reflect upon the base lines that are introduced as a result of our project.

8. Research Team Reflection (200-300)

The positive aspect about the research experience in this program was that as a group of students and academic partners we were able to collect significant information and from different perspectives, i.e., from academic partner's perspective and student's perspective. This helped us as a group to tackle issues of feedback to make a change.

The research was carried out online due to Covid. Although it was online, we gathered 55 filled questionnaires, which is a fair amount of information that helped us understand the issues that students face when getting their feedback and the change they hope to see. However, we had hoped for more responses. The timing of the survey has probably affected the number of responses. When we distributed the survey, classes had already finished and students either focused on their assessments or had completed their assessments already. We would not have this problem with the second survey, because we plan to distribute this at the start of the second semester.

Since this project is significant for the students' experience and more work is to be done, we agreed to continue working on this project next academic year. We concluded that carrying out a second survey would be beneficial to gather more student feedback which allows us to reflect on the base lines introduced and respond

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accordingly. Additionally, as a group, we are aiming that by next year we can establish an outline that shows the student journey in relation to the learning outcomes, modules and assessments, feedback presentation and terminology used.

References:

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