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Assessment and Feedback Report

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INTRODUCTION

Liverpool Student's Union is pleased to present our Assessment and Feedback Report, which is based upon an amalgamation of our findings and recommendations for assessment and feedback, as presented within our NSS Response Report and our Student Written Submission.

As the Vice President Academic Quality for 2015/16, one of my priority campaigns for this year, is to address student's issues regarding the quality of assessment and feedback that they receive whilst studying at LJMU.

Assessment and feedback has, in line with national trends, consistently been the lowest score for the University in the National Student Survey from 2012-14. While it is pleasing to see that LJMU remains slightly above the national average for assessment and feedback in the NSS, this remains the lowest scoring area in questions 1-22. The overall score for this section has remained at 75% after climbing from 73% in 2012, to 75% in 2014. This means that a quarter of final year students at LJMU were not satisfied. It should be noted, however, that LJMU's Assessment and Feedback score was 3% above the national average in 2014.

Specific issues relating to feedback from the NSS 2014 open comments include the timeliness of feedback, the depth of feedback, and how students feel that it is sometimes unconstructive and contradictory. Similarly, feedback regarding assessments highlighted issues with assessment support and guidance, as well as with assessment bunching.

It is likely that, much like other areas of the student experience, what constitutes 'good' feedback and the expectations of what feedback should be between students and academics will differ.

We envisage that an improvement in the quality of assessment and feedback provided across all Faculties, will enable the University to not only improve student satisfaction levels as measured through our NSS score, but will also reduce the number of students who leave University due to academic failure; an issue which has recently been raised at University Committees.

Our report also alludes to the issues that International Students raised during our International Student Project. Through addressing these issues, we hope to remove any barriers that International Students face whilst studying at University and increase the Universities appeal to International Students, in order to potentially boost future recruitment figures.

You'll see through this report that we have gained invaluable insight into what a range of students at LJMU think about their experience of assessment and feedback and have suggested '10 Recommendations to Improve Assessment and Feedback' based on our research.

The authoring of this report has been led by the LiverpoolSU Vice President Academic Quality, in consultation with LJMU students and staff.



JAMIE BENNETT

VICE PRESIDENT ACADEMIC QUALITY

WHAT WE KNOW

84% of

students rated the variety of assessments at Stage 3, or above on the NUS Benchmarking Tool.

25% of final

year students at LJMU were not satisfied with their assessment and feedback.

61% of our

students rated the 'timing of your deadlines' at Stage 3 or below on the NUS Benchmarking Tool

54% of

students said that they 'Often', or 'Very Often' make changes to their work based on feedback.

18% of

students dislike their assessment guidance and support

13% of

students dislike the quality and timeliness of their feedback

60% of

students said they always understand what is expected of them to achieve the marks that they want.

17% of

students said they didn't know what was expected of them to achieve the marks they wanted.

SUMMARY OF OUR '10 RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK' THAT WE WOULD WELCOME BEING INTRODUCED:

The main purpose of this report is to make 10 recommendations that the University could adopt to improve 'Assessment and Feedback'. Our 10 recommendations seek to address the key issues that students continually referred to when asked about 'Assessment and Feedback' during our GOATING exercise, Mini SU activity and our International Student Project. In turn we hope that these recommendations will improve the satisfaction levels of our students and our NSS score for question 22.

- 1.** Greater use of effective forms of group feedback being used, such as peer assessment, use of model answers, or engagement with the marking criteria in a small group seminar.
- 2.** All summative assessment coming with detailed, personalised, and constructive feedback to enable students to improve their marks for future assignments.
- 3.** Face- to-face feedback being offered to all students who request this form of feedback on all summative assessments.
- 4.** Increased use of formative assessments, such as presentations, that will enable students to reflect on their performance and develop their personal and employability skills.
- 5.** Assessment Mapping (as shared as good practice by the Liverpool Screen School and used in other schools such as the School of the Built Environment) be implemented across the institution as soon as practicable.
- 6.** A calendar of deadlines to be made available to students prior to module selection, to avoid the potential clustering of assessment deadlines.
- 7.** An introduction to University study skills included in the induction period for every student and that sessions on specific types of assessment are offered before each type is attempted by students for the first time.
- 8.** Study skills support provided by Student Advice and Wellbeing (SAW) being advertised through students' lecturers and personal tutors, especially during busy assessment periods.
- 9.** Students being offered sessions with tutors to discuss the marking criteria and ensure they have not misunderstood it – this is especially important on heavily weighted assessments.
- 10.** Students being offered feedback on drafts in tutorials when requested in order to allow them time to improve before their next deadline.

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK RESEARCH

It seems clear that Assessment and Feedback should be an area of focus for improvement within the university, especially given the positive correlation which can be found between the scores for overall satisfaction, in question 22 of the NSS, and the Assessment and Feedback score for each course.

Given this, we recently decided to conduct an Assessment and Feedback activity at our Mini SU's. Our activity involved asking students to rate the stage they considered their Faculties Assessment and Feedback to be at. This was achieved through using the NUS Benchmarking Tool featured below. The results of our Mini SU activity revealed that the majority of students at LJMU rated all aspects of Assessment and Feedback, as being at either stage '3' or '4'. This highlights that although most students are generally positive, there are still improvements that need to be made.

ASSESSMENT	1	2	3	4	5
THE WAYS IN WHICH YOU ARE ASSESSED	There is little variety in the ways in which you are assessed and it doesn't relate to your learning objectives.	Your course has prepared you and some thought has been given to whether the assessment shows what you have learned	There is a clear link to the learning outcomes of the course. Different types of assessment are used e.g. exams, essays, presentations, group work, reflective log etc.	Your assessments use skills that are useful outside of University e.g. to help you get a job when you graduate	You feel empowered that you have a say on how your assessments are decided and that they show a wide variety of your skills and knowledge.
HOW YOUR ASSESSMENTS ARE SCORED	Criteria are vague, confusing, hard to find and often contradictory.	The criteria is mostly clear and detailed enough, but you may not know how to use them.	It's clear and easy to understand what you are being asked to do and how it relates to your course.	Your course has prepared you for what you need to do and you fully understand what is expected of you to achieve the grade.	Assessment criteria are agreed and are clear, easy to find and linked to your learning outcomes. You fully understand and are supported to use them.
TIMING OF YOUR DEADLINES	Deadlines are bunched together, often all at the end of the year. You are poorly informed about deadline dates at the start of the year.	Deadlines are slightly more spread throughout the year, but there is little planning and some can happen at the same time depending on what modules you choose.	Assessment are planned within departments to be more spread out. You know when modules are at the start of the year.	Assessment are planned within departments to be more spread out, including joint honours students. You know when modules are at the start of the year.	All programmes have their workload spread fairly across the year. A calendar is available before module selection and you can discuss whether to move deadlines if necessary.

FEEDBACK	1	2	3	4	5
MARKING	Marking isn't clear and some Lecturers are known to be 'easy markers'.	Marking is consistent within department, but some joint honours students may see a difference.	Marking is consistent within departments and connected subjects, but may differ across the University	Marking standards are the same across every course and lecturers are using a full range of marks.	Marking standards are the same across every course and lecturers use a full range of marks. You feel involved in the marking process.
FEEDBACK TIME	You get your feedback too late to improve it. Sometimes you don't get feedback at all.	Your feedback is useful, but you sometimes don't get it in time to improve.	You usually get your feedback within 15 days and in time to prepare for crucial assessments.	You get all of your feedback within 15 days and can use it to prepare for your next piece of work, including crucial assessments.	You get your feedback before 15 days with plenty of time to prepare for your next assessment. You get constant verbal, written and email feedback.
FEEDBACK QUALITY	Feedback is poor and doesn't help you to improve. Often it's just grades or one word comments, with no explanation.	At least a sentence of feedback is given for each piece of work, with some justification and ways to improve. Feedback on exams is hard or impossible to get.	Feedback clearly identifies areas for improvement. You can get general or group feedback on exams.	Individual feedback is given on all forms of assessment, including exams. It's detailed and gives clear examples on how to improve.	Detailed, constructive feedback is given on all forms of assessment, including exams. The ways to receive feedback are clearly explained at the start of the course and you can choose the format you want to receive it. You can also meet with the marker to discuss feedback.

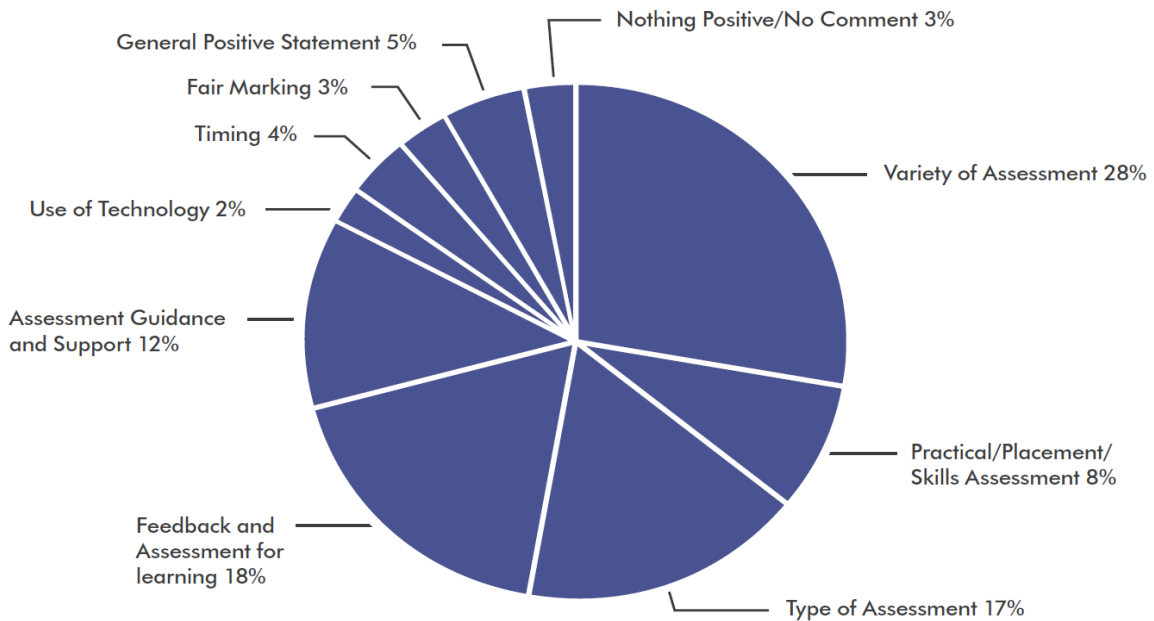
We also decided to conduct a GOATING activity, to explore the issues in more depth, and to enable us to establish some potential solutions and recommendations.

The two main questions that we asked students during our face to face discussions

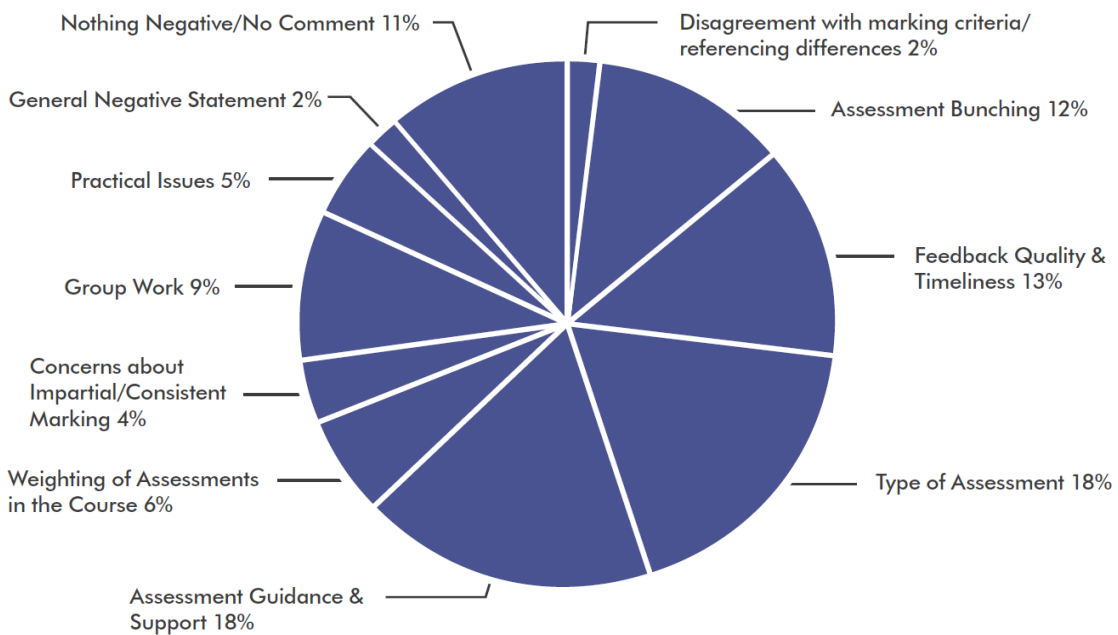
identified what they liked and did not like about the ways in which they were assessed.

We received responses from students across all schools and faculties and classified their responses into broader themes. The two charts below outline the responses we received.

What do you like about the ways you are assessed?



What do you not like about the ways you are assessed?



ASSESSMENT

1. ASSESSMENT GUIDANCE AND MARKING CRITERIA

The joint biggest concern raised by students during our assessment GOATing exercise was the quality of assessment guidance and support given to them when preparing for assessments. This has been raised across all faculties in our 2013 and 2014 FSVRs.

We have received varied responses from different faculties on prioritising this issue. One example of positive action is the response we received from APSS last year, which was, “School Directors to ensure that assignment advice is available in an appropriate form at the beginning of the teaching semester. This advice should be flagged in induction and transition meetings. FEC recommend that all programmes consider the discussion of transparent assessment criteria and assessment preparation at programme meetings September 2015.”¹ We hope to see this implemented well in the APSS Faculty and, if well received by students, to see that practice spread across LJMU.

Students noted how they can particularly struggle at the beginning of their course when they are unfamiliar with the types of assessment, as they do not feel like they receive adequate support to enable them to understand the marking criteria for the different ways in which they are assessed.

“The part of coursework I don’t like is with being in first year I have never done some types of work before for example, written a scientific report. So I think it’s silly to just expect

students to know what one looks like, the expected structure and style is unknown to us but we still get marked on them.”

Research carried out into the first year student experience by QAA and NUS in 2011-12² concluded that students were very aware of the idea of independent learning when they came university.

However, they also identified a need for support and guidance into how to do this effectively, especially in their first year as they had no previous experience from which to draw.

It is also important that students fully understand by what criteria they are being judged in an assessment and what the marker is expecting of them. Often, marking criteria are written for the marker and is not accessible to students.

The majority of students (57%) questioned during our Mini SU ‘Assessment and Feedback’ activity, rated ‘How your assessments are scored’ at Stage 4 or 5, indicating that they fully understood marking criteria and have access to how they were going to be marked prior to their assessments.

Similarly, in the Assessment GOATing exercise, we asked 170 students whether they understand what is expected of them in assessments to achieve the marks that they want. 60% of students said they always understand what is expected of them, while 24% indicated they sometimes do and at other times don’t (sometimes based on different tutors or modules). A worrying 17% said they never fully understand what they need to do in assessments to achieve the required grades.

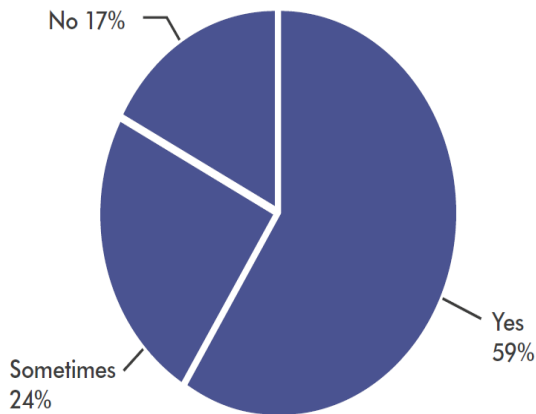
Given the importance of assessment in shaping the learning of students, it is crucial that they understand what they are expected to do at the end of a module and for them to be aware of

¹ Faculty of Arts, Professional and Social Studies (March 2015), Faculty Student Voice Action Plan

² National Union of Students (2012), Student Experience Research 2012, Part Four: First Year Experience Accessed Online: <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/2012_NUS_QAA_First_Year.pdf>

what skills they are expected to demonstrate in the assessment to gain the grades that they want to achieve.

Do you understand what is expected of you from your work, to achieve the marks you want?



Where students mentioned assessment guidance and support as a positive issue, they praised tutors who give feedback on work before the final deadline and where they have been engaged with the marking criteria and fully understand what is expected of them.

Equally, during our International Student Project, many students highlighted that although they often knew what was expected of them to pass their assessments, they did not believe that they received an adequate amount of support, or guidance to enable them to achieve the required grades.

A particular problem that was raised concerned the language barrier that International students had to overcome. This was usually in reference to the terminology that lecturers sometimes used and with regards to the questions asked in assessments, which International Students felt were sometimes asked in an incomprehensible way. This posed particular difficulties during exam periods when students could not ask their lecturers for clarification on the wording of the question.

International Students also mentioned that they required additional support and guidance

on English essay writing skills, as essay writing was usually done in a different way where they came from (e.g. Students may have previously wrote essay's in the first person and thus used 'I' in their essays).

Students views that were captured during our Mini SU 'Assessment and Feedback' benchmarking activity also highlighted issues regarding the standardisation of marking across the University. In particular, students from EHC and Science Faculty identified issues with inconsistent markers, with some Lecturers being referred to as 'easy markers', in comparison to other Lecturers in the same department.

A total of 20% of Science Faculty students and 15% of EHC Faculty regarded marking in their Faculty to be at Stage 1 of the NUS benchmarking tool, indicating that fundamental improvements could be made to standardise assessment marking in these faculties.

Students from Engineering and Technology Faculty and APSS Faculty were the most positive about their experiences of marking, with almost half of students questioned rating marking in their faculty at Stage 4, or above, which indicated that they fully understood the marking process and noticed little, or no deviation in the way in which they were marked by different Lecturers.

Similarly, some joint honours students highlighted significant differences in the way in which they were marked across departments and noted that these inconsistencies impacted upon their overall grade.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

- An introduction to University study skills included in the induction period for every student and that sessions on specific types of assessment are offered before each type is attempted by students for the first time (this would be especially useful for

more specific skills testing such as writing lab reports).

- Study skills support provided by Student Advice and Wellbeing (SAW) being advertised through students' lecturers and personal tutors, especially during busy assessment periods.
- Students being offered sessions with tutors to discuss the marking criteria and ensure they have not misunderstood it – this is especially important on heavily weighted assessments.

2. VARIETY AND TYPE OF ASSESSMENTS

A common area on which students praise their course is on the variety of assessments available. This was raised by students from APSS, EHC, and SCS in the Winter 2014 FSVRs. This was also, by a significant margin, the top thing students liked about the ways they are assessed on our Assessment GOATing exercise (28% of the overall responses). It is clear that this is something students both notice and appreciate where it is practised.

"I like the different ways we are assessed. I struggle with the pressure of exams so knowing that I can be assessed on essays and presentations enables me to feel more confident."

Equally, during our International Student Project, the majority of students agreed that a variety of assessments was necessary and useful to developing their learning.

This view was also echoed in our Mini SU benchmarking activity, as students rated the 'ways in which students are assessed' as the aspect of assessment and feedback that they considered to be the greatest and most developed at LJMU.

A total 84% of students rated the variety of assessments at Stage 3, or above on the

benchmarking tool. In particular, students from APSS Faculty rated the 'ways in which they are assessed' the highest among all Faculties, with almost quarter of students stating that they consider the variety of assessments in APSS Faculty to be at Stage 5 on the benchmarking tool, indicating that they believed that no further improvement needed to be implemented.

Students who value a variety of assessments do so because it ensures they get a chance to be assessed (at least some of the time) in a way in which they feel confident. Where students talk about both the positive and negative types of assessment, they show how they feel more confident in some kinds of assessment than in others.

"I do not like the rigidity of the assessments, having the option of doing A B or C would be nicer so if there was a format you didn't like (e.g. presentations) you could do something similar but in a format I'm more confident with."

We recognise that sometimes the preference for students to have a say in the ways in which they are assessed can be because they want to be assessed in a way that allows them to perform their best. Therefore we also want to emphasise the importance of challenging students, especially where it will benefit the future employability of a student and were the student has the appropriate support to develop in areas that they are perhaps not so confident in.

If students were in a position where they could choose the ways in which they would like to be assessed, they should be encouraged by their tutors to challenge themselves with a variety of assessments. With appropriate support, this could serve to hugely benefit the future employability of students, as it would allow them to choose the type of assessment which would most assist their future career.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

- Increased use of formative assessments, such as presentations, that will enable students to reflect on their performance and develop their personal and employability skills.

3. ASSESSMENT BUNCHING

Students across all faculties and schools have been raising concerns, year on year, about assessment bunching and the impact this can cause. It is an issue that has been communicated in a number of previous FSVRs and was identified as one of our 'Top Ten Academic Priorities' for this academic year.

In our Assessment GOATing exercise, students from all faculties raised 'assessment bunching' as a negative issue and, overall, it was one of the most common issues raised by students. It is a particular problem among students on combined honours programmes.

“Over the three years there has been poor spacing out of assignments, there will be no assignments for a while before being given several in a short space of time.”

When questioned, many of our International Students stated that although they appreciated that the University sets a limit on how many assignments can be scheduled in the same week, they still find it difficult to complete several essays in a short period of time.

This seemed to be particularly problematic at Master's level where assessment demands increased and students felt like they could improve their grades if they were given more time on conflicting assessments.

Equally, during our Mini SU 'Assessment and Feedback' NUS benchmarking activity, 61% of our students rated the 'timing of your deadlines' at Stage 3 or below, indicating that deadlines

for assessments could be more evenly spread out across the academic year.

Students from Science Faculty, were more positive about their assessment deadlines, with 43% of students rating the 'timeliness of your deadlines' at Stage 4 or above, indicating that students from Science Faculty acknowledged that they understood and knew all of their assessment deadlines at the start of the academic year, which enabled them to better plan when they should complete their assignments.

The QAA guide on assessment states that the timing of assessments should be carefully considered to ensure “that students feel they are able to bring their best efforts to bear on the assessment tasks and that treatment within and across programmes and disciplines is equitable.”³

We are confident that solving this problem would allow students to perform to the best of their ability on each assessment and would enable students to benefit from the full reflection and learning potential in each assessment.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assessment Mapping (as shared as good practice by the Liverpool Screen School and used in other schools such as the School of the Built Environment) be implemented across the institution as soon as practicable.
- A calendar of deadlines to be made available to students prior to module selection, to avoid the potential clustering of assessment deadlines.

³ QAA (2012), Understanding assessment: its role in safeguarding academic standard and quality in higher education, pg. 13, Accessed Online: <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/understanding-assessment.pdf>>

FEEDBACK

As the Quality Code states, “[Assessment] forms an essential element of the learning process. Students learn both from assessment activities and from their interaction with staff about their performance in those activities.”⁴ It is well documented that students are guided by the content of assessments to tactically discriminate in the focus of their reading and learning. A particularly important part of this process is the role of feedback and how it impacts upon students’ personal development throughout the course.

The following areas were particularly prominent in the various student feedback mechanisms that we used.

1. FEEDBACK TIMELINESS

Question 7 of the NSS relating to promptness of feedback saw a small increase of 2% from 2013-14, but remains the fourth lowest scored question (of Q1-22). This issue was reinforced by the Assessment GOATing exercise and has been a recurring theme in the FSVRs. While there has been improvement noted in a number of areas of the institution, feedback is still arriving too late to be of any effective use to students in many courses.

“Feedback and deadline overlaps mean that you have to submit another assignment without having feedback.”

As the University agreed to implement a 15-day feedback turnaround policy in September 2010, it is worrying that this is still not being met in some areas. In creating this policy LJMU stated that feedback is a crucial part of the developmental nature of assessments, prompt

feedback is important to allow students to reflect and improve before their next deadline.

Many of our International Students raised the 15-day Feedback Policy as a particular concern and stated that feedback was not always given within the specified 15 day deadline. This posed a significant issue for students who had to submit two projects in less than 15 days and resulted in some students submitting their second assignment, without having received feedback for the assignment that was submitted first. As a direct result, students had no opportunity to improve the grade of their second assignment, as they had received no feedback from their first assignment, from which they could improve.

When we asked students at our Mini SU’s to rate how they felt about the timeliness of feedback, the majority of students (31%) rated the ‘timeliness’ of their feedback at Stage 4 on the NUS benchmarking tool. An additional 7% of students rated feedback timeliness at Stage 1 and stated that students received feedback too late to make improvements, whereas 18% of students rated feedback timeliness at Stage 5 and stated that students continually received feedback on time. With regards to a breakdown of statistics via faculty, students from ECH Faculty scored feedback timeliness lowest on the benchmarking tool (31 % rated timeliness at Stage 1 or 2), whereas students from APSS Faculty were the most positive about feedback timeliness (33% rated timeliness at Stage 5).

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

- Students being offered feedback on drafts in tutorials when requested in order to allow them time to improve before their next deadline.

⁴ QAA (2015), UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the Recognition of Prior Learning, Accessed Online: <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b>>

2. FEEDBACK QUALITY

There are similar levels of positive and constructive comments from students about the quality of their feedback. On the one hand students told us they appreciate when feedback is personal, constructive and detailed for them.

“We get a lot of feedback that is very constructive- the tutors use the ‘what worked’, ‘what didn’t work’, and ‘what could you improve’ format for most assignments so we know how to improve.”

On the other hand, in our Assessment GOATing exercise, 13% of students raised issues with feedback quality as an area for improvement; similar issues have been a recurring issue in our FSVRs. Question 8 on the NSS (“I have received detailed comments on my work”) has been the second lowest score in the feedback questions for the past two years with only a 1% increase in 2014.

This was reaffirmed by students who participated in our Mini SU ‘Assessment and Feedback’ NUS benchmarking activity. The majority of students (22%) rated the quality of their feedback at Stage 3, indicating that further improvements could be implemented. This could include students being presented with the opportunity to discuss their individual feedback when necessary, in order for them to improve their marks in the future.

Students from APSS Faculty scored feedback timeliness the lowest (57% rated feedback timeliness at Stage 3, or below), whereas Science Faculty had the highest feedback timeliness rating from students (51% rated feedback timeliness at Stage 4, or above), indicating that many of these students consider their feedback to be constructive, detailed and tailored to their individual needs.

Student issues with feedback quality mainly relate to feedback not being detailed enough (especially where a mark is given with no

written or verbal feedback) or feedback being generalised for a whole class and no individual feedback being given.

“Assessment feedback is very unhelpful. We are simply given the marks with no explanation and ways we could improve for next time.”

Similarly, International Students agreed that often the feedback they receive is not sufficient. Many stated that the feedback frequently consists of standard comments such as ‘well done’, which is often inconsistent with the mark that they received. This could be overcome if lecturers distinguished specific ways in which students could progress to higher grades, or by providing anonymous examples of marks given to past assignments.

Another comment raised by an International Student, highlighted an occurrence of a student receiving handwritten feedback, which coincides with cases we have experienced through our Advice Service of unintelligible handwritten feedback notes. Some students therefore stated that they would prefer to have face-to-face feedback, especially if the mark given to them is particularly low.

While it would be ideal for detailed feedback to be received for every piece of work, we recognise this is not always practical for smaller, formative assessments and it will have a number of resource implications for LJMU, and as such a need for investment. While detailed written feedback is desirable, we would suggest that face-to-face feedback discussions in tutorials are more effective.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

- Face-to-face feedback being offered to all students who request this form of feedback on all summative assessments.

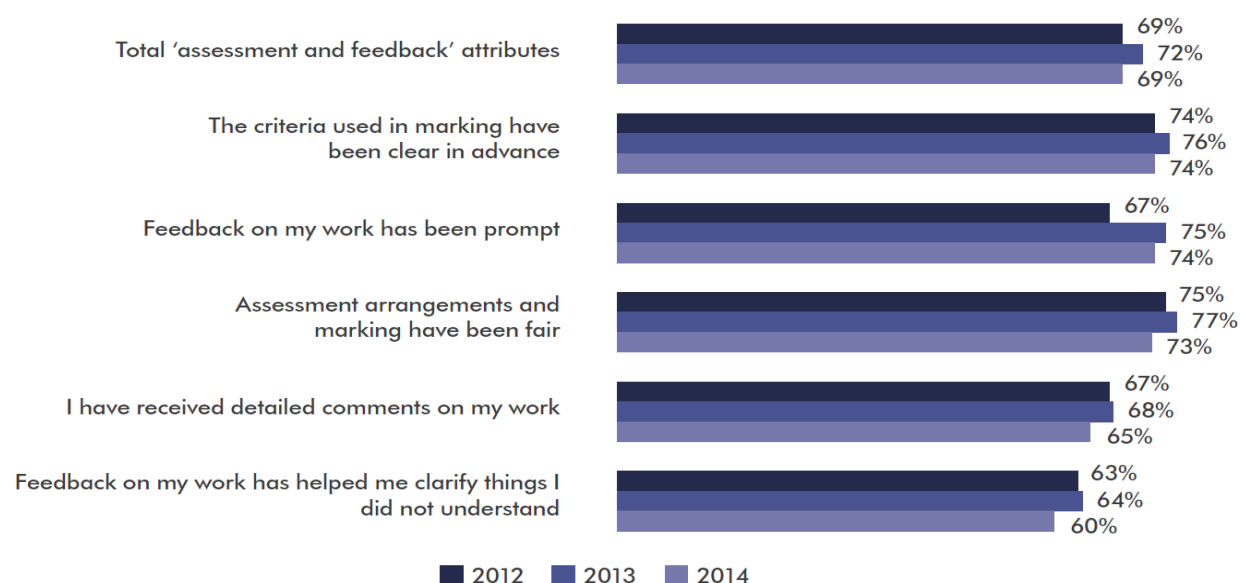
3. IMPACTFUL FEEDBACK

In both 2013 and 2014, Question 9 of the NSS (“Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand”) has received the lowest score of Questions 1-22; getting 65% and 67% respectively.

This worrying trend has also been shown through various other student outcome data sources such as the LJMU Student Survey. In the Survey we asked an equivalent question regarding feedback, which climbed from 60% to 63.7% from 2011-2013, but then dropped down to 59.8% in 2014.

Assessment and feedback, percent who agreed and strongly agreed

Source: LJMU Student Survey 2014



In the 2014 UKES, in answer to the question, “How often have you made significant changes to your work based on feedback?” only 54% answered Often, or Very Often.

How often have you made significant changes to your work based on feedback?

Source: UKES 2014



This research highlights that too few students are reporting that the feedback they receive is having a clear impact on their learning and future assignments. A QAA guide on assessment advises that feedback should “[demonstrate] explicitly what improvements could be made in a way that can be used in future assessment tasks to enable a better performance to be achieved.”⁵

⁵ QAA (2012), Understanding assessment: its role in safeguarding academic standard and quality in higher education, pg. 13, Accessed Online: <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/understanding-assessment.pdf>>

If feedback is not leading to students better understanding the subject, learning outcomes, or assessment skills, it is a serious concern that many of our students are unable to advance and progress throughout the duration of their course.

“I don’t like the feedback we get as sometimes [it] doesn’t give me anything to improve on.”

This is not to suggest that staff who spend more time providing feedback which is far more detailed would solve this issue. Rather, we would suggest that greater work needs to be done to understand what makes feedback impactful and spread better practice across the institution.

Where students in our GOATing exercise identified positives aspects of Feedback and Assessment for Learning, it often praises how the feedback has been impactful on their development and future assessments. This also suggests that students are perhaps the best judges of whether feedback has been impactful.

“I like the fact we get feedback quite quickly and get comments on coursework to see where we’ve done good or bad and where we could improve.”

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

- All summative assessment coming with detailed, personalised, and constructive feedback to enable students to improve their marks for future assignments.

GROUP WORK

Over the past three years, LiverpoolSU has frequently received feedback from students

about group work, which has been shared with LJMU through biannual FSVRs. Group work provokes a difference in opinion amongst students across LJMU; analysis of this information identified that many students enjoy the experience of working in a team to complete assessments, however fairness of marking is regularly raised as the main area of concern for students, which is impacted by the way students work together.

Group work was identified in June 2013 as one of LiverpoolSU’s ‘Top Ten Priorities’, for the 2013/14 academic year. Based on student feedback we recommended that LJMU investigate group work practices across the University, providing guidance for staff and students on how to address variations in team contributions, and investigate practices allowing for students to be individually marked.

Given the frequency with which students spoke to us about their concerns, we once again made group work one of our ‘Top Ten Academic Priorities’ in 2014/15. We recognise that group work can be a beneficial assessment tool, helping students to develop a range of transferable skills. However, it appears that more guidance needs to be offered to students surrounding the logistics and practicalities of working in a group successfully. Furthermore provisions need to be put in place for when contribution within the team is not evenly distributed.

In March 2015, LiverpoolSU spoke to students with the aim of identifying areas of good practice across the university linked with students’ experiences of group work. During this time our staff spoke to 451 students from across all four faculties; we asked students to end the following sentence ‘My group work experience has been good because...’

In addition, we asked students whether they knew who they should go to if they faced problems with group work. It was pleasing to see that out of the 442 students who answered, 83% replied saying that they did know who

they should go to. However, it was still concerning to see that that 17% of students were not aware of where to seek support if this eventuality was to occur. These results were fairly consistent across all faculties except for Education, Health and Community which had closer results (Yes: 54%; No: 46%) but as the sample size was much smaller from this Faculty, this may be less accurate.

It is clear from our research over several years that there is no simple student position on group work – there are both positives and negatives.

1. POSITIVES OF GROUP WORK

The overwhelming majority of responses from students to our question about the positives of group work focussed on how they helped with personal development. This includes developing teamwork skills, as well as learning skills from their peers.

“It has introduced me to new people and shown me how delegation must be used correctly in order to achieve an efficient outcome.”

“I have worked out how I work well and effectively for level 6.”

“Gives me the chance to develop skills people may have that can incorporate into mine.”

It seems that group work can help students both to develop skills that are useful in their academic development and to prepare them for the world of work (giving them valuable employability skills).

2. NEGATIVES OF GROUP WORK

While students appreciate many of the developmental opportunities of group work,

they face many practical obstacles in their experience of it.

One of the main issues students faced while participating in group tasks, was that many students stated that they often struggled to working with their peers – especially when they felt that some members of their group were not putting in sufficient effort. This can often lead to them spending time supporting, or dealing with these colleagues, rather than focussing on their own share of the work. This leads to them feeling that they are unable to present their best work and that this has an unfair and negative impact on their grades.

“Group projects never work; I don’t get along with my current group yet can’t move groups. This is affecting my grades.”

This issue is compounded by the perception that, in many cases, the final mark each student receives does not fairly represent their own input to the project. This leads to students feeling that they are being marked on other people’s work and that their grade is not a fair reflection of their own personal contribution.

“I hate group work because we are all given the same mark.”

“There are issues with the marking of group projects as some students do not do adequate work yet get disparate marks.”

It must be noted here that the specific concern of unfair marking has not been raised within the Faculty of Education, Health and Community to LiverpoolSU’s knowledge, but that is not to say that its students do not experience challenges with group work.

Furthermore issues regarding the marking of group work is further entrenched by the lack of personalised feedback.

“More feedback on group work with individual breakdowns”

Some students have also commented that although they see the benefits of participating

in group work, they feel that there are simply too many group work assessments throughout the year and that they are often weighted too highly within a module. This is particularly the case for Level 6 students, who have expressed the opinion that group tasks at this stage of their University experience can have more of a detrimental impact on their final grade, than group tasks in their first year of University.

“Group work shouldn’t be such a large part of the final grade (60% last year)...”

When students have referred to the main advantages of group work they have focussed on how it encourages the development of personal skills (both academic and employability). It follows, therefore, that unless the development of these skills is part of the learning outcomes for the module, group work is not usually the most effective way of assessing students understanding of the module.

Group work should therefore be planned effectively and sparingly throughout the duration of a student’s time at University, and should not carry a high assessment weighting for the module.

It could be argued that group work would be better planned as formative assessments, rather than summative assessments – as it can help students to work effectively as part of a team and introduces wider skills into the curriculum, while avoiding any unnecessary negative impact on their grades.

At the LTDG in March 2015, where Group Work was discussed as one of our Top Ten Academic Priorities, it was agreed to:

- Make criteria for group assessment more explicit
- Better prepare students for groupwork in earlier stages of programmes and differentiate purpose and intent of group-based activities from learning how to work in a group through to

assessing the outputs from group activities

In addition it was agreed that:

- The Teaching and Learning Academy would collate examples of good practice with contributions from LTDG members
- Based on these examples and other resources, guidance for Group Work is developed and this guidance should take account of arrangements for students with disabilities.

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATION

- Greater use of effective forms of group feedback being used, such as peer assessment, use of model answers, or engagement with the marking criteria in a small group seminar.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this report we have highlighted student's positive experiences of assessment and feedback at LJMU, as well as their main concerns and future priorities.

Our research has indicated that while students at LJMU consider certain aspects of their Assessment and Feedback process to be completed to a particularly high standard, such as the variety of assessments that they can complete, many students also believe that certain aspects of the Assessment and Feedback process could be vastly improved, particularly in relation to the lack of assessment support and guidance available.

While we have identified many Assessment and Feedback issues and areas for concern that students have at LJMU, we are also full of ideas and enthusiasm to solve them. This is evidenced in our '10 Recommendations for Assessment and Feedback' (*refer to the beginning of the report*), which seek to address concerns raised by students during our GOATing exercise, Mini SU Benchmarking activity and our International Student Project.

We envisage that if implemented our '10 Recommendations to Improve Assessment and Feedback' could further develop and increase our student satisfaction levels, which we hope in turn would reflect positively upon our NSS score for question 22.

Many people have contributed to this report, and we would like to thank all of the students who spoke to us about their experience of assessment and feedback. We hope that this report, along with our NSS Response and Student Written Submission are another step

in the important work we have been doing, and will be doing together in the coming years.

We look forward to hearing your response and would welcome the prospect of working together, in partnership, to implement all, if not some, of our '10 Recommendations to Improve Assessment and Feedback'.



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