

Feedback in First Year: A Landscape Snapshot



Feedback in First Year:

A Landscape Snapshot Across Four Irish Higher Education Institutions



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Feedback in First Year: A Landscape Snapshot

The Y1Feedback project is funded by the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning under the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund 2014. At its core, the Y1Feedback project aims to enhance feedback dialogue in first year undergraduate programmes using digital technologies to better support student transition to Higher Education (HE). In particular, the project seeks to identify and develop case studies of technology-supported feedback approaches for first year.

This initial study was undertaken to increase awareness of feedback practices within participating institutions, with a specific focus on the first year of study. Emanating from this research, this document provides a snapshot of current feedback practice in first

year undergraduate programmes across the four Y1Feedback partner institutions: Maynooth University; Athlone Institute of Technology; Dublin City University; and Dundalk Institute of Technology. It provides an insight into staff perspectives on feedback in first year and includes examples of staff experiences and feedback practices utilised. It also offers an insight into the student perceptions and experiences of feedback in first year.

The findings from the study reported here, together with a parallel output consisting of a synthesis of the related feedback literature, will serve to inform the identification of case studies of technology-supported feedback approaches for first year.

Introduction

“Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative.”

(Hattie and Timperley 2007)

Effective feedback can play a critical role in both supporting transitions and in improving retention due to its potential to foster student motivation, confidence and success in the first year (Tinto 2005, Poulos and Mahony 2008, Nicol 2009, Kift 2015). Feedback has increasingly become the focus of research and HE policy in recent years, partly due to national surveys in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Asia and Ireland, which have consistently identified low levels of student satisfaction about feedback practices in HE (Carless 2006, James, Krause and Jennings 2010, Price et al. 2010, Radloff and Coates 2010, HEFCE 2014, Jessop, El Hakim and Gibbs 2014, HEFCE 2015, Mulliner and Tucker 2015).

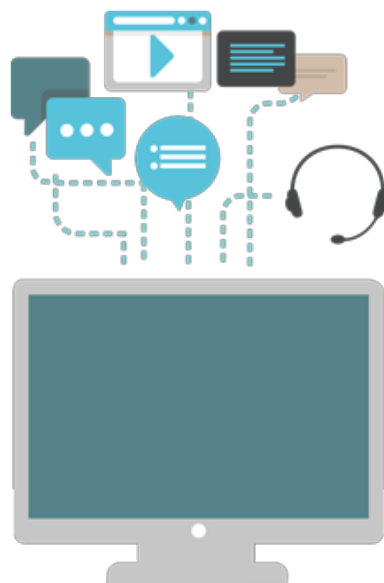
In the Irish context, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) completed in 2013, found that nationally, 22.3% of first year undergraduates never, and 45.1% only sometimes, received timely written or oral feedback from teachers on their academic performance (ISSE 2013). Similarly in 2014, the ISSE report indicated that 23.3% never and 44.9% only sometimes received timely written or oral feedback from teachers on their academic performance (ISSE 2014).

This consistent data suggests that there are some areas of concern surrounding feedback practices in first year in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Y1Feedback project directly responds to these concerns. Primarily, it aims to enhance feedback dialogue in first year undergraduate programmes to support students with their transition to HE. Furthermore, the project seeks to identify and develop case studies of technology-supported feedback approaches for first year, with a view to sharing examples of effective practice in this area within the partner institutions and beyond.

For the first phase, we sought to provide a snapshot of current practice within participating institutions. To this end, focus groups with first year undergraduates were conducted to enhance our awareness and knowledge of the types of feedback activities presently engaged in during their initial year of study. Additionally, teaching staff responded to an online questionnaire designed to offer insight into feedback practices employed in first year.

This report summarises the key themes and points for reflection that emerged from the discussions with the students and the survey responses collected from practitioners. Examples pertaining to the themes, primarily in the form of illustrative quotations, are provided throughout this report.

It is important to note that for the purposes of this document, the term 'feedback' is used in an all-encompassing manner. It refers to all feedback guidance provided to students (both formative and summative), and encapsulates feedback offered by various sources, such as lecturers, tutors or student peers.



Methodology

During April 2015, four student focus groups took place, one at each of the four participating institutions. Specifically, first year student class representatives were invited to participate, owing to the nature of their role which assumed that they would be able to articulate a broad spectrum of student perspectives and experiences. In total, 36 first year class representatives from a wide range of disciplines (including business, engineering, humanities, language, science and social science) participated. All representatives were over 18 years of age.

In terms of their class sizes, the majority of the focus group participants represented cohorts of approximately 80 students. However, this did vary, with some participants coming from smaller classes of ten students or fewer, whereas other participants were members of classes exceeding 100 students. Class sizes of 150, 180, 250, 320 and 500 students were also reported.

For the student focus groups, a semi-structured approach was used. The focus groups explored student perceptions of feedback, assessment and feedback processes in general, and also how technology was used within these processes.

All discussions were digitally recorded and then professionally transcribed. Identifying references to institutions, programmes of study or teaching staff members were removed from the data set during transcription to ensure anonymity. The data was subsequently collated and analysed to identify key themes. A copy of the baseline focus group questions can be viewed in Appendix 1.

An online survey was developed to explore staff current feedback practices in first year. Across the four participating institutions, an email was issued inviting all staff teaching first year undergraduates to participate in an anonymous online survey about feedback practices.



We estimated that approximately 700 members of staff were eligible to participate across the four institutions. Over a two-month period (spanning April 2015 to June 2015), 213 responses were logged. Thus, in the region of 30% of the target population participated.

The online survey comprised of 26 questions in total, including a mixture of multiple-choice type questions whereby participants selected the applicable options, and open-ended questions that requested staff to generate their own original response.

Essentially, the survey sought to explore staff perceptions of feedback, plus general assessment and feedback practices, as well as technology-supported feedback practices, all specifically in relation to first year. In addition, the survey provided staff with an opportunity to share experiences, challenges and their recommended approaches to feedback for first year. A copy of the staff survey is provided in Appendix 2.

Staff Findings

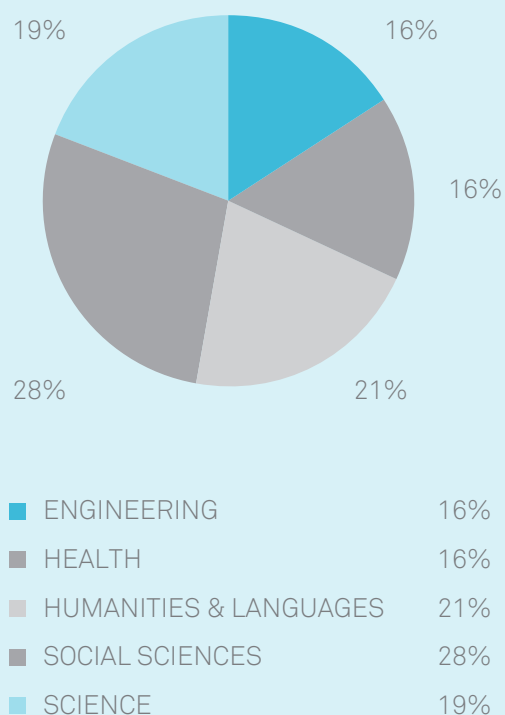
Staff respondent profile

Staff completing the survey came from various disciplines. As shown in Figure 1, participants from the social sciences field constituted the largest number of respondents at 28%. The other disciplinary areas health, the humanities and languages, and the science and engineering subjects, were also comparatively well-represented.

In terms of HE teaching experience, the majority of respondents (63%) had 11 years or more experience. Of these, 20% indicated teaching for longer than 20 years. Slightly under one-third of respondents (29%) reported between four to 10 years teaching experience, with 8% teaching for three years or less.

Figure 1.

Disciplines represented by staff survey respondents across the four participating institutions.



Aside from a small group of participants presently delivering classes for between four and eight different first year undergraduate modules, 90% of the respondents confirmed teaching one, two or three first year modules in the 2014/2015 academic year. Across the participants, teaching one module was the most commonly reported. Class sizes ranged from 10 to 800 students. The median class size was 48, with 75% of staff respondents facilitating classes attended by up to 100 students.

A description of the key findings arising from the survey response data is provided in the following sections. It is important to highlight that it was not mandatory for participants to respond to all survey questions. Accordingly, this accounts for the variations in the number of respondents and counts across the different survey items presented below.

How do staff see the purpose and role of feedback?

Overall, there was strong agreement among the respondents around the purpose of feedback. As shown in Table 1, almost all (99% of staff respondents) agreed or strongly agreed that feedback served as an opportunity for learners to obtain information about their work in time to influence future tasks and performance.

Agreement was also nearly unanimous that the purpose of feedback was to provide information to students about their learning, with 99% of participants agreeing with this statement. Likewise, 91% of respondents agreed that feedback should prioritise areas for improvement for students with the greatest difficulties. However, when consulting the open-ended responses, there was some disagreement around the purpose of feedback in supporting improvement for students with the greatest difficulties. One participant emphasised that the role of feedback is to: *“Provide areas of improvement for ALL students”*. Another respondent went further to note that the purpose of feedback was to: *“Indicate areas of improvement for all students, including excellent students.”*

Agreement was consistently high for the statements that referred to feedback as it relates to learners as individuals (i.e., students utilising the feedback for their own purposes). However, some uncertainty surrounded the use of feedback for collective purposes (for example, to facilitate peer discussion of feedback) with 32% of participants choosing ‘don’t know’ for this statement, and 22% of participants opting to ‘disagree’.

Table 1. Staff views about the purpose of feedback.

Survey statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Count
To provide information on assessed work in time to influence future tasks.	72%	27%	0.5%	0.5%	0%	192
To provide information to students about their learning.	67%	32%	1%	0%	0%	190
To prioritise areas for improvement for the students with the greatest difficulties.	42%	49%	5%	4%	0%	187
To clarify what good performance is.	37%	48%	11%	3%	1%	185
To reflect on students' assessment responses to improve future teaching and assessment tasks.	33%	54%	8%	4%	1%	186
To facilitate peer group discussion of feedback.	9%	35%	32%	22%	2%	184

Note.

Participants signalled their level of agreement with each of the given survey statements. As previously mentioned, it was not compulsory for participants to respond to all survey items; hence, the variations in counts.

Examining attitudes with feedback, the majority of respondents (99%) agreed that feedback is an integral part of learning. Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 2, the staff members surveyed were largely in favour of the transparency of feedback, with 79% agreement that “feedback practices should

be made explicit to students”, compared to 9% who disagreed with this statement. Most of the staff (71%) did agree that “preparing students for receiving feedback is important”, although 21% responded that they ‘did not know’ to this item.

Table 2. Staff opinions concerning feedback and feedback practices.

Survey statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Count
Feedback is an integral part of student learning.	83%	16%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	183
Students value timely feedback.	35%	46%	14%	4%	1%	182
Feedback practices should be made explicit to students.	33%	46%	12%	7%	2%	181
Preparing students for receiving feedback is important.	25%	46%	21%	8%	0%	180
Students seem to be only interested in the grade.	21%	50%	12%	16%	1%	179
Students like to discuss feedback provided.	11%	39%	27%	21%	2%	179
Peer feedback is a valuable learning experience for students.	9%	31%	49%	8%	3%	179
Students engage with the feedback provided.	9%	45%	24%	21%	1%	179
Students apply/ make use of feedback.	7%	42%	31%	18%	2%	179

Greater differences in opinion emerged in response to the statements that related to staff perceptions of student views of feedback. As presented in Table 2, this was apparent for statements such as “students like to discuss feedback provided”. In this instance, 50% of participants agreed with the statement, 23% disagreed and just over a quarter of participants indicated that they were unsure. Similarly, despite half of the respondents agreeing that students, firstly, do engage with, and secondly, do apply and make use of, feedback, between 18% to 31% of the staff disagreed or were unsure about these student behaviours. Views about the benefits of peer feedback also varied. Only 40% of the participants considered peer feedback to be of value, whereas nearly half of the respondents remained undecided.

Consensus was, however, clearer around the emphasis placed on timely feedback, with 81% of participants registering their agreement that learners value timely feedback. Moreover, the majority of staff (71%) agreed with the statement that students are only interested in the grade.



99% of staff respondents strongly agreed or agreed that feedback was an integral part of student learning.



49% of staff respondents were unsure whether peer feedback is a valuable learning experience for students.



71% of staff respondents felt that students seemed only interested in the grade.

The survey also sought to determine to what extent staff felt various factors impacted on the nature of feedback that they provided. Evident from Table 3, the strongest influence was an individual teacher's personal beliefs about the value of feedback.

A staff member's own workload, followed by the specific form of the set assessment (e.g., multiple choice questions compared to an essay), were the next most influential factors.

Table 3. Staff views about factors influencing feedback provision.

Factors	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Count
Own beliefs about the value of feedback.	8%	7%	10%	26%	49%	178
Own workload.	12%	9%	15%	25%	39%	182
The nature of the assessment (e.g., MCQ vs. essay).	14%	4%	16%	33%	33%	175
Your level of involvement in the module.	20%	10%	14%	29%	27%	175
Timing of assessments.	11%	13%	22%	32%	22%	175
Student engagement with feedback.	16%	13%	22%	33%	16%	175
The standard of work produced by the student.	26%	14%	23%	23%	14%	175
Relationship with the students.	44%	14%	19%	15%	8%	176

What are the most commonly used assessments?

Table 4 indicates staff usage of a range of assessment methods across the institutions. Written examinations are the most extensively reported, with 43% and

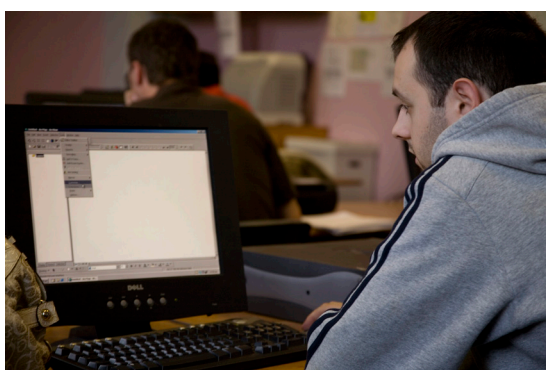
26% of participants, respectively, always or frequently using this form of assessment. Practical skills tests constituted the next most widely used assessment activity. At the opposite end of the usage spectrum, digital artefact creations stood out as the least employed.

Table 4. Assessment methods used by staff.

Assessment methods	Frequency of use					Count
	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	
Written examination	13%	9%	9%	26%	43%	182
Practical skills test	29%	5%	14%	24%	28%	153
Multiple choice questions/ quiz	28%	11%	17%	18%	26%	156
Individual project	27%	5%	16%	27%	25%	155
Problem sheets/ homework	31%	14%	13%	21%	21%	147
Essay	33%	13%	14%	20%	20%	159
Presentation	33%	11%	19%	18.5%	18.5%	157
Group project	36%	13%	17%	20%	14%	155
Laboratory report	70%	4%	6%	7%	13%	138
Oral examination	51%	9%	15%	15%	10%	142
Digital artefact creation (audio/ video/ web)	63%	9%	14%	6%	8%	136
Peer assessment	57%	17%	16%	8%	2%	133

Other assessments mentioned by staff included: technical reports and interviews; field trip reports; individual reflective reports; policy papers; Moodle quizzes (with calculated answers); contributions to class blogs; posters; seminar participation; online forum participation and portfolios.

It is worth highlighting that none of the listed assessment methods were used by all participants. For every example given, a proportion of the respondents (ranging in size from relatively small e.g., 13% to considerably larger e.g., 70%) reported that they had never used a particular assessment technique. It seems likely that this is rooted in disciplinary differences (for example, laboratory reports are traditionally not used in humanities subjects). Additionally, qualitative differences in the nature and delivery of the module itself (for instance, practical modules versus theoretical modules) are also likely to impact on the assessment method.



**Most frequently used
assessment methods =
Written examination
+ Practical skills test.**



**Least frequently used
assessment methods =
Peer assessment +
Digital artefact creation
(audio/video/web).**

A further point of comment is the overall low usage of group assessments reported. Although in the survey the majority of the listed assessments were not characterised as tasks for individuals or groups, those tasks explicitly designated as assessments involving more than one learner (namely, group projects or peer assessments) tended to have lower usage ratings. For example, 57% of participants specified never using peer assessments, while 36% of participants never used group projects as the means of assessment.

Table 5. Assessment submission formats used by staff.

Submission formats	Frequency of use					Count
	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	
Paper copy	11%	5%	8%	27%	49%	171
Submission via Moodle	19%	3%	7%	27%	44%	167
Submission via Turnitin	45%	7%	8%	18%	22%	153
Email	32%	21%	22%	16%	9%	153
Google Drive/ Dropbox/ OneDrive	91%	2%	3%	2%	2%	128
USB or memory key	82%	8%	4%	5%	1%	132

How do staff request students submit assessments?

As displayed in Table 5, assessment submission via paper copies was found to be the most widely used format. However, submission via Moodle was also highly reported. Overall, the least used submission formats included virtual tools or virtual storage facilities on the Internet for example, Google Drive, Dropbox and OneDrive. Similarly, the reported use of USB or memory keys was low. Other submission methods cited by staff were: Google Hangouts; Skype; Launchpad and YouTube.



86% of staff respondents indicated that assessment feedback is always or frequently provided to first year students on continuous assessment work.

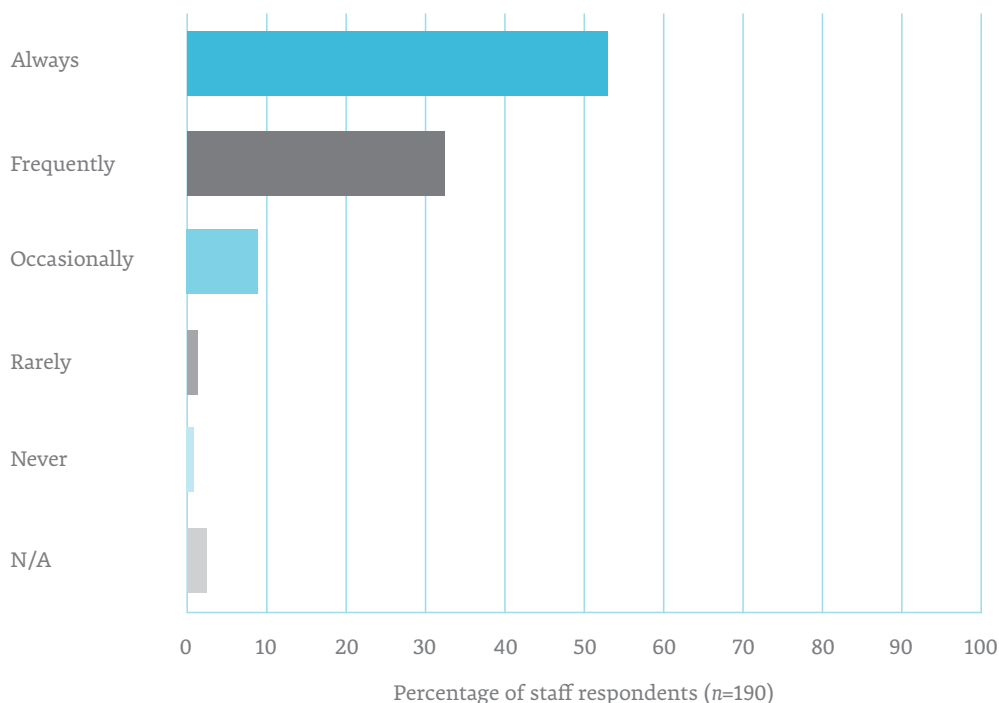
Staff insights on the preparation, provision and timing of assessment feedback

Continuous assessment

To determine how often feedback is made available to first year students on work categorised as continuous assessment, staff were asked about the frequency with which feedback was provided. Generally, as shown in Figure 2, feedback provision was high, to the extent that 86% of staff indicated that feedback was always or frequently given to first year learners.



Figure 2. How often is assessment feedback prepared for students on continuous assessment work?



Who provides the feedback?

When asked about the identity of the feedback provider, overwhelmingly, module lecturers (i.e., the participants themselves) were acknowledged to be the primary source of feedback (Figure 3). Besides this, some responses indicated that within certain modules, feedback responsibilities were shared by a group typically comprised of the lecturer, tutors and others, such as demonstrators.

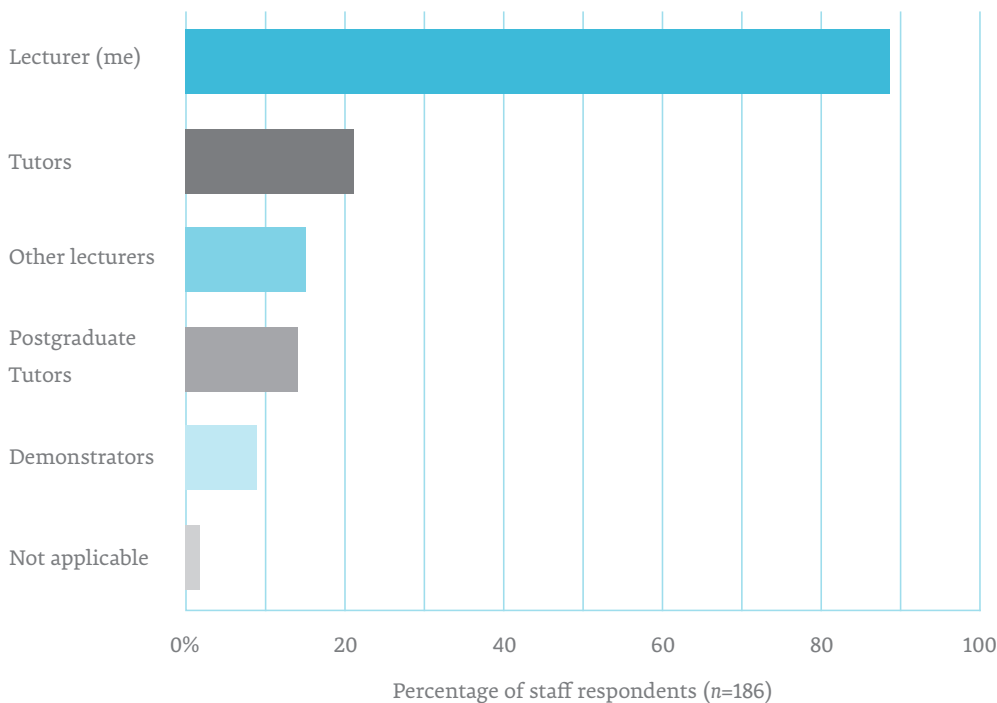
In the majority of cases though, it appeared that providing feedback was the responsibility of a sole individual; that is, the first year module lecturer.

Additional practitioners referred to by participants as giving feedback included project managers and programme directors.

When is feedback provided?

Interestingly, for the majority of participants, the time taken for feedback to be returned to students was indicated to be two weeks or less from the date of submission. Providing feedback within one week of submission was practiced by 34% of respondents.

Figure 3. Who provides assessment feedback to first year students?



As the timeframe between submission and the final feedback increased, the number of participants giving feedback at each of the time-points decreased (Figure 4).

For example, 22%, 19% and 9% of participants returned feedback within two, three or four weeks of submission, respectively. Some respondents (12%) also refer to feedback being provided during the completion of the assessment itself (i.e., during the assessment process) as in the case of practical work.

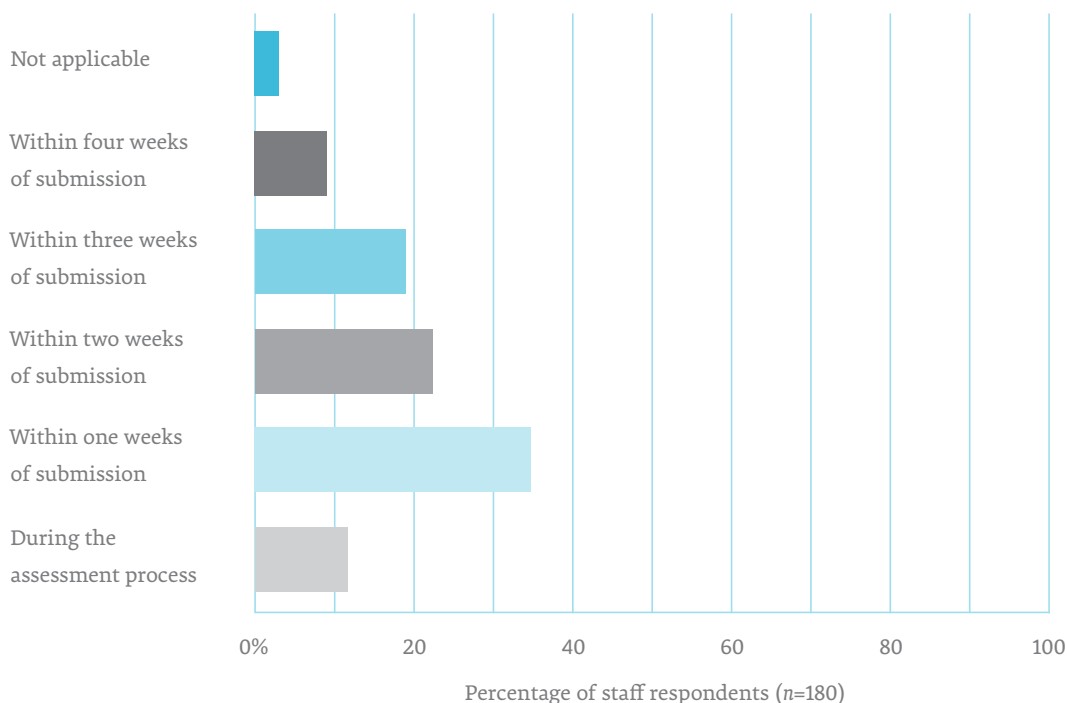
An open-ended question was embedded in the survey to encourage participants to expand on some of the factors impacting on the feedback timeline.

Several participants noted that teacher workload and large class sizes negatively influenced the time required to return feedback. As one participant remarked:

“Unfortunately, due to the number of students, it is no longer possible to provide individualised feedback in a timely fashion.”

Furthermore, four participants noted that it was typical for students not to receive feedback until the end of the semester, or during the consultation day held post-examinations or after exam boards.

Figure 4. When is feedback returned to first year students?



In what format is feedback provided?

Table 6 presents the various feedback formats utilised by participants. Across the institutions, respondents reported using multiple feedback formats. A combination of a grade and brief comments was the most widely used type of feedback, with 64% of

participants ‘always’ or ‘frequently’ providing such feedback. Slightly fewer participants disclosed using a grade plus significant written feedback, yet the percentages here were still comparably high (Always = 30%; Frequently = 21%).

Table 6. Type of assessment feedback provided on continuous assessment work.

Feedback formats	Frequency of use					Count
	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	
Grade and significant written feedback	11%	15%	23%	21%	30%	147
Grade and brief comments	11%	9%	16%	36%	28%	159
Consultation day	26%	10%	24%	17%	23%	153
Generic feedback to module group	23%	8%	21%	29%	19%	155
A feedback template/ rubric	37%	10%	15%	20%	18%	148
Grade only	24%	27%	19%	12%	18%	139
One-to-one discussions with students	8%	10%	34%	33%	15%	164
Brief comments only	53%	19%	16%	10%	2%	124

In terms of the least used feedback format, 53% of participants replied that there was never an occasion when they provided brief comments alone (for instance, in the absence of an accompanying mark or grade). Conversely, 18% reported that they 'always' provided the grade alone, while 51% responded 'rarely' or 'never' to this particular format. Oral means of feedback were also employed, with 33% of participants answering that they 'frequently' used discussions with individual students to give feedback.

To what extent staff relied on feedback templates or rubrics was also probed. Just over half of the participants reported using these at least occasionally, with 38% of these responding 'frequently' or 'always'.

When asked to explicitly identify all the modes they used to provide feedback, many participants endorsed more than one. Oral feedback to individual students or groups, plus handwritten comments, emerged as the most widely used, with 55%, 51% and 53% of participants respectively, mentioning these modes. Fewer participants (35%) employed typed comments to relay feedback. In comparison, slightly more staff members (43%) revealed that they engaged with online feedback mechanisms.

Summative assessment/ final examinations

As reported in Table 7, staff indicated that they were most likely to provide feedback on examinations through consultation day meetings (48%) and grades only (44%). Even though just under a third of the participants employed a combination of the grade plus brief written comments, it was less likely for staff to give more extensive written feedback alongside the grade, with only 18% indicating the use of this format. Notably, this is in contrast to the feedback delivered on continuous assessment, for which half of the participants responded that grades and detailed written feedback constituted one of the more frequently used feedback methods. Bearing this in mind, it seems likely that the nature and level of feedback provided could be influenced by the assessment type.



Table 7. Type of assessment feedback provided on final module examinations.

	Staff percentage usage	Count
Consultation day	48%	89
Grade only	44%	81
Grade with brief comments	32%	60
Grade and significant written feedback	18%	34
One-to-one discussions with students	18%	33
Generic feedback to class group	8%	14
A feedback template/ rubric	4%	8
Brief comments only	2%	3

Non-graded work

Concerning feedback provided on non-graded work or participation, overall, nearly three-quarters of the respondents revealed that they did offer formative feedback or feed-forward feedback on such activities (albeit with varying frequency).

Around 30% of staff indicated that they did provide such feedback on a regular basis, compared to 41% of staff who only sometimes included this type of feedback for other learning activities.

Peer feedback

Just 23% of respondents specifically acknowledged using peer feedback in the first year. Those participants who had featured peer feedback within their first year modules commented on their experiences. A small number of staff described how peer feedback formed part of in-class activities, including presentations, group work and practice exercises:

“Students are invited to comment on strengths and areas for improvement after presentations.”

“Got students to correct sample answers using a rubric and answer sheet.”

Two participants detailed how peer feedback is a core component of the required peer assessment in their modules. Under these circumstances, the peer feedback impacts on the grade individual learners achieve. One respondent cited the use of an explicit online peer assessment tool stating:

“Larger modules use SparkPlus for peer evaluation of group work.”

Another participant referred to peer feedback in the context of Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE):

“Assessment grid given with option for written feedback – OSCE type.”

Aside from the module-required peer feedback activities, only one participant mentioned the additional efforts undertaken to foster peer dialogue around feedback:

“Students encouraged to study/ work in small peer groups to help each other and provide feedback to each other.”

How do students access feedback?

When it comes to conveying feedback, distribution in-class was the most commonly endorsed (31%), followed by the use of Moodle or other similar virtual learning environments (VLE) (26%), and then, one-to-one discussions (25%). Fewer than 10% of those surveyed indicated that email or collection from the department was the means by which feedback was returned. A small proportion of staff listed other options including online quizzes, homework discussions during tutorials, hard copy collection and consultation days (with some stipulating that a combination of methods was employed).

The role of technology in feedback

Do staff use technology to provide feedback?

Predominantly, the use of technology by respondents to support feedback practices was low.

For many of the technologies listed (e.g., digital audio, social media, Moodle Wiki or blog), approximately, 90% of the participants reported never using these tools (exact percentages are given in Table 8).

Table 8. Use of various technologies to provide assessment feedback by staff.

	Frequency of use					Count
	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Always	
Microsoft Word	26%	10%	14%	22%	28%	162
Moodle gradebook feedback comments	55%	6%	8%	15%	16%	137
Email	19%	16%	24%	26%	15%	157
Moodle quiz	57%	9%	13%	13%	8%	141
Moodle gradebook feedback files	60%	7%	7%	18%	8%	142
Moodle rubric	78%	4%	6%	4%	8%	134
PDF annotation	60%	17%	10%	7%	6%	135
Turnitin GradeMark	74%	5%	7%	8%	6%	136
Digital audio	86%	5%	5%	2%	2%	133
Social media	93%	4%	1%	1%	1%	125
Moodle wiki or blog	90%	3%	4%	2%	1%	128
Video	85%	5%	8%	2%	0%	131

Among the technologies that staff did use with greater frequency were: Microsoft Word, email feedback and feedback comments entered via the Moodle gradebook feature. Of the few participants who used Turnitin to provide feedback, one participant explained the reasoning behind this decision, in that, Turnitin enabled the lecturer to track and determine how many students had accessed their feedback:

“I use Turnitin for feedback. I can see whether the students actually look up the feedback or not. Less than 50% of students look at the feedback.”

What factors impact on the decision to use technology?

Staff consistently identified a lack of time and the “increased workload” associated with introducing technology as two of the factors that would discourage them from adopting technology to provide feedback. Several participants perceived the additional time required to actually learn or undertake training as to how to implement the technology as being among the reasons why they would not consider using such technology:

“Lack of time to attend workshops to up-skill and keep up to date with the new technologies.”

“Time to both learn new technologies, apply and prepare with new technology and deliver in a variety of ways.”

Alongside these factors, participants who felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge about the technology cited this as one of the contributing factors, with some referring to a shortage of available training:

“Do not know how to use the technologies.”

“A lack of training at this time which will be rectified early in the forthcoming year.”

At a more personal level, other participants wrote about their own feelings, especially in terms of perceived competency or confidence, as influencing their decision:

“I wasn’t totally confident in my ability to use Moodle.”

“Not comfortable with my knowledge of technology.”

Some participants indicated that they felt that their institutional information technology infrastructure precluded them offering feedback via technological means:

“Poor and unreliable technology available at [redacted], extremely limiting, unfortunately.”

“Generally poor quality of IT service in my institution, the network and Wi-Fi are slow and unreliable, IT support is often also very slow.”

For some respondents, previous experience in using technology appeared to have an impact on the likelihood of them returning to use technology again in the future. Encounters characterised as problem-strewn or negative meant that some participants were reluctant to continue with the technology:

“I have problems with Moodle recording grades on essays that I have marked using embedded rubrics. It has to be better than this for me to engage with technology further.”

“Repetitive stress when inputting many marks, Moodle very slow to move through a large class when inputting results.”

Conversely, for other participants, there were no factors that would make them question whether or not to use technology. Indeed, as one participant remarked, the technology may help to address certain challenges commonly associated with feedback, such as students who are not physically present at classes, or on the campus, missing out on receiving their feedback:

“None. I think technology is essential for disseminating feedback. It’s impossible to ensure every student has access to feedback when they don’t all show up for class. Technology (e.g., Moodle) provides a good solution to this.”

However, that is not to say that technology supported feedback guarantees that students will access the feedback. A small number of staff pinpointed a lack of student engagement with the online feedback as discouraging them from providing it (although there was an acknowledgement that this may not be exclusive to technology supported feedback):

“Some are slow to engage with formal Moodle site or to use their student email account.”

“Student engagement with technology. Most forms suffer from poor engagement.”

Quite a few of the participants expressed their preference for feedback approaches that did not require technology support, in particular for first year students. Often, these participants provided a rationale as to why they favoured particular methods, with the perceived personalised nature of face-to-face feedback and time efficiency, in the case of handwritten feedback, emerging as influential factors:

“I prefer to engage with first year students on a personal basis and it also encourages attendance which is the real issue.”

“I prefer one-to-one and face-to-face, an important moment to gauge and shape the content of feedback.”

“I am happy to receive work on Moodle or via email but handwriting on the exam or essay paper is actually more efficient than using comments functions in MS Word, for example.”

“Handwriting is quicker when giving individual feedback on work handed in on paper.”

Related to this, some respondents made direct references to feedback provided by technological means as sending out negative signals to students (especially in terms of disinterest or lack of concern), with several staff additionally commenting on the potentially detrimental impact that this could have on the relationship between the students and the lecturer:

“I have relatively small classes; the use of technology as a principal feedback format may appear impersonal and disinterested.”

“Lack of personal contact - feedback without a personal context could be upsetting.”

“Handwritten feedback shows that you care, I’m not sure using technology has the same impact.”

Factors Impacting Staff Use of Technology for Feedback



- Increased workload
- Lack of time
- Confidence level with technology
- Poor IT Infrastructure
- Low student engagement with technology
- Problems with Moodle
- Preference for non-technology enabled approaches

What assessment feedback approaches work well for staff?

Contained within the survey was an option for staff to describe an assessment feedback approach that worked well for them in a first year undergraduate module, including any technologies used. Two-thirds of respondents opted to share a non-technology supported approach to providing assessment feedback.

Among the most frequently described approaches were those that made reference to oral/ one-to-one assessment feedback. Often, respondents elaborated in their answers to give a rationale for their preference for such face-to-face approaches. Common reasons forwarded included: to eliminate misunderstandings; to help students with the transition to HE; to manage student grade expectations; and to establish a forum for dialogue between the lecturer and student:

“Direct face-to-face is best as they do not misinterpret the news.”

“They [students] are new to the system and to the assessment process - we need to, not only take time to talk about their strengths, how to improve their grades, and how to develop their skills, but also set expectations in terms of our grading system, i.e., the student who has always achieved 80s in school now getting a good solid 67 and being extremely disappointed with it!”

“In large classes, students who come to one-to-one sessions benefit more from advice, even if they have previously received it in written form.”

Providing feedback in-class was also a regularly cited approach. Selected illustrative examples given here included feedback in lectures, class reviews and discussions and oral feedback communicated at practical training sessions:

“Feedback in-class on group presentations has always proven beneficial for the total cohort.”

“The next class after an assessment I ask students to open their submitted practical assessments on the PC and I give a demonstration of how to do the assessment using a data projector.”

Likewise, several participants specified written feedback as an effective approach for them:

“Written feedback on submitted scripts.”

“Written feedback on assignment hand-in sheets.”

To a lesser degree, fewer participants chose to write about a multiple-stage or mixed-methods approach. Instead, most focused on an approach that could be characterised as a single modality approach (e.g., face-to-face alone or written comments only). Irrespective of this, some participants did recount their experiences of combined approaches as is evident from the following examples:

“I give my feedback in written form but delivered face to face so that the student understands the tone and content and has the opportunity to ask questions or clarify points.”

“Detailed written feedback and one-to-one discussion of assignment strengths and weaknesses.”

Of those participants who did respond with examples of technology-supported feedback approaches, online quizzes and multiple choice questions (MCQs) administered via Moodle, proved popular. A number of the participants took the opportunity to stress that their MCQ feedback was in no way fleeting or superficial, but that it was designed to support future learning (e.g., helping students to recognise why a certain response may not be correct). Although for others, the feedback generated in this way was far broader in nature (i.e., general comments as opposed to specific).

“Feedback on MCQs is in the form of the answers and why they might have gone wrong or report-writing skills - scientific writing skills.”

“MCQ quizzes where a reason is given for why the incorrect option selected was not correct as well as providing the correct answer.”

“Generic feedback to Moodle Quiz.”

The use of VLEs, primarily Moodle, constituted another widely cited technology-supported approach.

“I’ve used Moodle to provide feedback on submitted assignments.”

“We use Moodle for a specific continuous assessment and upload feedback files for the students to access.”

Some of the other technologies that participants volunteered as feedback examples were individual feedback sent by email, digital audio files, screencasts, audience response systems and apps. All of these, however, were mentioned by only one or two participants in each instance. Thus, they appeared to be the exceptions, rather than methods that were perhaps more widespread in use. Occasionally, participants did reflect on the potential advantages offered by these approaches:

[Digital audio is used so that students can] “replay the feedback at any time using any device.”

“Screencasts work well as students engage with the medium, watching on average four times.”

[The] “app-based in-class interactive system allows students to respond with sketches to various questions.”

Staff Recommended Feedback Approaches



- Oral face-to-face feedback
- In-class feedback
- Handwritten feedback
- Combination of written and face-to-face
- Moodle MCQs

What are some of the challenges faced by staff when providing feedback?

Finding the time and space within existing workloads to give feedback represented a commonly cited difficulty for staff. The time commitment required to produce feedback that would ideally be of benefit to students (for instance, in terms of depth or advice pertaining to their future performance) was additionally highlighted by some participants:

“Workload: Detailed feedback is time-consuming to prepare and one-to-one sessions can be hard to schedule.”

“Time constraints – volume of work for students/ lecturers.”

“Time to complete content of module and still have time to discuss feedback.”

“Time. It would be great to have time to go into more in-depth feedback so that students could get the most from their future learning but time is a hindrance.”

“The feedback can take more time to prepare than the grading itself.”

Large class sizes were considered to be another challenge to providing feedback. Together with the practical limitations, such as a longer period of time needing to be allocated to preparing and returning feedback for large cohorts, there was an awareness of how the volume of feedback required for large groups could compromise the quality and content of the feedback. This was something that several participants alluded to in their responses:

“Providing meaningful feedback to large numbers – students tend to disregard generic feedback.”

“When the class is very large, it can be difficult to provide everyone with meaningful feedback.”

“I aim to provide students with feedback within two weeks of submitting but with 500 students, it literally isn’t possible.”

A less-noted challenge for some staff was a perceived lack of interest or engagement by students with the feedback. According to one participant, this took the form of students not being sufficiently proactive in terms of requesting and using feedback:

“From my experience, the biggest barrier I face is getting students to look for and engage with feedback, particularly on an individual basis.”

Some staff, however, did comment that they felt such disinterest in feedback was not consigned to all aspects of feedback.

Grades, for example, did attract student interest. Furthermore, interest was observed to fluctuate depending on assessment activities, most notably, final examinations:

“Main issue for me is that students don’t seem to implement suggestions in future assessment. Seem only concerned with grade.”

“A significant amount of students only care about the course only two weeks before the final exam and will ask for feedback then when we actually already provided it during the term.”

Lastly, student absenteeism from feedback-related activities, such as in-class group feedback reviews, or individual feedback meetings, was mentioned by a small number of participants as a challenge that had been encountered:

“Often students wait for results to appear on Moodle and don’t bother attending group or individual feedback sessions.”

“If I were to give general feedback on the submissions in lectures, perhaps the most time effective method, this would only reach a maximum of 50% of the class due to very poor attendance at the lectures.”

Key Challenges For Staff



- Time
- Workload
- Large class sizes
- Lack of student engagement with feedback

Summary

Overall, feedback provision itself was reported to be high, as in almost all cases, feedback was reported to be always or frequently communicated to students, with variations observed in the mode of assessment and the method of feedback utilised. Feedback provision seems to be linked to the nature of the assessments: while a majority provide grade only for final examinations most provide more detailed feedback for continuous assessments.

Staff recognise that feedback is integral to learning and that students value prompt and timely feedback with the majority of respondents indicating that feedback was returned to students within three weeks of the original submission. Despite the fact that the majority of staff agreed that students were only interested in grades, it is worth noting that more than half reported that they rarely provided only the grade to their students. Rather, there was a greater likelihood that the feedback comprised of the grade plus some form of explanation or additional advice (typically in the form of comments or written notes).

The individual and personal nature of feedback was mirrored in the staff responses. A high percentage of respondents valued oral and face-to-face feedback mechanisms for the very reason that such activities enabled an exchange and dialogue with students about their work. Logistically though, it was (and is) acknowledged that large student numbers may not be conducive to providing feedback in this manner.

It is also worth noting that some uncertainties did surface in terms of how students engage with feedback. Staff opinion was more divided as to whether students are adequately prepared to receive feedback, whether they make use of it, and if students actually like discussing their feedback.

The use of technology to communicate feedback was limited to a small number of explicit examples, although recurrent references could be seen to VLE/Moodle use. Increased workload, confidence level with IT, student engagement with technology and in some instances, doubts over the reliability of the underlying systems (IT, Moodle) required to implement the technology, were among the reasons offered by staff for their reluctance to use technology. In addition, a concern for the appropriateness of using technology to communicate feedback to first years emerged.

Overall, there was low usage of peer feedback and low awareness of the potential benefits. Although for many staff, instigating opportunities to talk about feedback is valued and important, it does not appear that the respondents extend these conversations to include peer-to-peer exchanges.

Staff participants highlighted a number of challenges in relation to the provision of feedback in first year including lack of time, increased workload, large class sizes, as well as lack of student engagement with feedback. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many staff felt that large class sizes seriously impacted on their ability to provide timely, individual and quality feedback.

Student Findings

How do students perceive feedback and its purpose?

The responses from the students revealed that they valued feedback, and in the main, they shared an understanding of feedback as a source of information or guidance, usually from a teacher, to aid improvement:

“I would consider feedback as an objective perspective from the lecturer that enables the student to encourage them and give them some constructive criticism to improve on going forward.”

Generally, students did interpret grades as a form of assessment feedback. However, while they accepted grades as useful performance indicators, they did not consider grades sufficient on their own in terms of feedback:

“They tell you, ‘Oh, you got such a grade,’ but they won’t actually say if the grade was like, was the essay assembled correctly, was it not, did it have everything in it, there’s not a lot in that sense.”

“Everybody got really, I mean seriously [bad] grades and sort of, we all know that he wants something different but nobody knows what that is.”

“Just getting told there you go, you got 60%, OK but why did I lose out on the other 40%. That has to be something I’m doing like and then you are just never told.”

Looking more closely at the function of feedback, students felt that feedback served a clarification purpose, in essence, indicating and highlighting to them where they were going “wrong” and signalling that “you should go and fix this”.

“If you are doing something wrong from the start, you are going to probably do that wrong until somebody corrects you. And if someone nips it in the bud at the start, it is going to make a hell of a lot of difference.”

Feedback also provided affirmation, in the sense of recognising achievement, validating “good work”, reassuring students that they are, as one student observed, on the “right track”, and have the potential to achieve more:

“I was aiming for 40, just 40%. I was looking for a pass and I got my feedback with the tutor, we sat in the office and she told me I got 73 ... that was very important to me you know that I am capable to achieve that ...”

Students emphasised the role of feedback in supporting and enabling improvement, particularly in terms of applying the feedback to future assessments:

“It does help even for future assignments ... even if it’s simple things like the first assignment I handed in, I forgot to use double spacing and they pointed that out in the feedback.”

“I think it’s really helpful because it sticks and then you can always look back on the ... feedback ... apply it to the new piece of work that you are doing.”

Further, students acknowledged that feedback frequently served as a motivator for them, especially if they felt (or the grade/comments received indicated) that they were underachieving. In these circumstances, feedback was often perceived to be a catalyst to work harder and improve, as one participant stated:

“If you hand up an assessment and it comes back 50% then you need to do something about it.”

Participants were asked whether the students they represented used the feedback received. They generally reported that students did use the feedback to improve subsequent work. However, they often explained willingness to engage with feedback in terms of student performance and goals. Many reported that those performing poorly, or simply below their own personal expectations, would be receptive to feedback, while those who were happy with their grades would perhaps be less so:

“I think if you’re failing you’re more likely to take on feedback, if you’re not doing as well as you want you’re more likely to take feedback on board because it’ll tell you how you can improve and do better, get a better grade.”

“A lot of the time if someone is getting a high grade but wants to improve they’ll be more eager to look at their feedback than say if someone was getting 60%, 60% is a solid grade to them and they think if I’m getting 60% that’s grand I’ll keep doing what I’m doing.”

The relationship between markers and students was also identified as a factor affecting receptiveness to feedback:

“I think the relationship between the student and the tutor if they respect, you know, respect their tutor and admire that person then you are more likely to take the feedback on.”

“Well the ones we’d get feedback on are ones that we do every week, so if you’re doing well in them our tutor would encourage you saying well done, keep up the good work and stuff. It does make you put a little bit more effort in because you know she’s happy with you, but if you just got an eight out of a ten or a nine out of ten and no feedback, it would just kind of be like I’m just doing it for a computer to read it, not an actual person who would be happy with you.”

Students were sensitive to the nature of the feedback, especially the way it is framed and communicated, with encouragement in particular being referred to frequently during the discussions:

“If your grades start dropping, you are still going to need feedback and encouragement from a lecturer, going OK, you need to keep this up, you have the ability to do better and always improve.”

Likewise, students commented on the impact of feedback at a very personal and individual level, with one student noting:

“It instils a bit of belief in yourself as well.”

“I would consider feedback as an objective perspective from the lecturer that enables the student, to encourage them, and give them some constructive criticism to improve on going forward.”

Do students receive feedback?

While many students confirmed that they did receive feedback, an inconsistent picture did emerge with differences reported in the amount, type and quality of the feedback; a pattern that was mirrored across the groups. Students experienced variations in the provision of feedback across modules and lecturers:

“It really, really varies, like there’s some modules that they do it fair and consistently and ... the feedback is given weekly. And some of them we don’t get feedback at all. So, yeah, it all depends on the lecturer.”

“You can get individual help if you want ... she’ll come down to you one-on-one ... She’s the feedback woman.”

“No, zero feedback whatsoever. You do your Christmas exams, you get your exam results and you do your midterm exams, you get your exam results. And everything else is non-existent.”

Experiences of approaching teaching staff (either directly or through virtual means) to request or discuss feedback are mixed. Many students noted it as a positive experience:

“There’s one or two lecturers in particular that I think are really good, that if you do need, you know, to talk to them about anything that you’ve problems with, they will, you know, be open to helping.”

Yet, for other students the experience was less positive and this was often linked to challenges in acquiring feedback:

“When you have like four or five weeks in between waiting for feedback from a lecturer about an assignment and you have [redacted] in your class I mean ... You would ask them and ask them and ask them but like, next week, next week.”

“Like there are certain lecturers that, if you get in touch with them and ask them for some feedback, you know, even over email or something, they will reply and there’s no problem. There are others that you try to contact and you get no reply at all.”

For students, the approachability of teaching staff is of paramount importance in accessing feedback:

“You need to be able to know that you can approach them and, you know, be able to get feedback really.”

However, it is important to note that these students reported being aware that if they did not receive assessment feedback in a timely manner, or indeed, at all, that they could approach lecturers/tutors after class, during office hours, on consultation days, or by email, to request feedback. Email requests appeared to be the most popular way to ask for feedback. Generally, the students confirmed that their feedback experiences had met or exceeded their pre-entry expectations regarding feedback in HE:

“I expected less help because you’d always been told that classes were a lot bigger or whatever, really big in college and you wouldn’t get that much feedback whereas I just think lecturers are more helpful than they’re given credit for.”

“We have smaller classes so I think the expectation for me is matched yeah.”

Although for some students, their current feedback experiences fell short when compared to past experiences:

“I came from a PLC (Post Leaving Certificate Course) and ... you would be able to just meet up with like the teacher and ... have discussions like but I just feel like here I know it is completely different but I don’t think you have that and I was used to getting so much feedback and then you are getting none and it’s just like what are you doing, you know.”

For a number of students, this was understood in terms of more impersonal relationships between teachers and students as a consequence of larger class sizes:

“Like in secondary school you get a lot more feedback from the teachers, like they know you better so you get a lot more feedback from them throughout the year and you can go to them and ask them questions, whereas college is way more like, you don’t know the lectures that well. They don’t know who you are and they don’t really care that much, they don’t have the same level of obligation to you as a teacher would have because they have maybe 200 students in a lecture whereas we would have only had 30. So it’s not really as important to a lecturer if three people fail out of 200, do you know what I mean?”

“It really, really varies, like there’s some modules that they do it fair and consistently and ... the feedback is given weekly. And some of them we don’t get feedback at all. So, yeah, it all depends on the lecturer.”

What type of feedback is received by students and how do students view this feedback?

Feedback is received in various ways, and this could be using a single method, or through a combination of modes. These included: grade only; oral; written; digital; and to a lesser extent, aural/face-to-face feedback.

Several students expressed a preference for one particular format of assessment feedback, or a combination of written and oral. Written feedback was popular. When explaining this preference, the students highlighted attributes such as the permanence of the text and the use of written comments as an “aide-memoire”:

“Having it written down, I think, and then the lecturer going over it with you and pointing out what you are doing, I think it’s really helpful because it sticks and then you can always look back on the, you know, the feedback.”

Predominantly, written feedback took the form of comments added to original, hard copy submissions, with fewer students receiving text-based comments online:

“Yeah, it’s mostly just written on the assignment, basically, but everything is handed in on paper and given back on paper, nothing’s online.”

A very small number of students mentioned experiences with structured written feedback via marking guides or rubrics. Those who did, however, referred to such rubrics as being very useful:

“Yeah, it’s helpful because it shows, say, for example, I have a [redacted] one due now and it has what a weak answer would contain, like it wouldn’t address any of the themes talked about in the course and you’d have poor control over your grammar and not vary your words or your vocabulary. Then it would show what a good quality answer would have and then what a mediocre one would have and it tells you your percentage going for each section. So if you include two themes you could get 10% if you make sure that you talk about them comprehensively and give your own opinion and stuff like that. So it kind of tells you what you need to have to get a good grade basically.”

Many students expressed the view that a combination of written and oral feedback (that allows for dialogue with the lecturer/tutor) is the ideal:

“You need oral because often the feedback won’t address all your ... they won’t be clear. So you need to engage your tutor or lecturer or whatever to clarify what you’ve done wrong.”

“I’d be of the opinion actually that oral would be better but I think sort of a mix is good because you need that oral thing to get the dialogue ...”

“... Yeah, to get the dialogue going and then write down the main points so you can refer to that later, and it also links your sort of memory back to the conversation. So there needs that I think.”

Peer feedback

Students indicated that peer feedback occurred frequently on the programmes they represented, although not all considered this to be feedback. Peer feedback was largely conceived to be quite informal and generally initiated by students themselves. Informal discussions of assignments, seeking advice from peers in person or online and practising presentations together, were all repeatedly mentioned. Some students had experience of face-to-face or virtual study groups, but this was less common.

“To be honest with you, it’s on Facebook, whatever name is online the closest to the button I’ll try to ask them [for feedback].”

“Though it’s extremely informal a lot of students try to meet up every Wednesday to have these study groups and there are a couple of people who will attempt exam questions.”

A very small proportion of students reported taking part in formal or structured peer assessment or feedback. For example, some students had used web-based peer assessment tools (e.g., SPARK PLUS – Self and Peer Assessment Resource Kit) to fulfil assessment task requirements set by lecturers.

Reflecting on the process of peer feedback, students expressed doubts about the value of feedback originating from their fellow students. The comments suggested a comparative approach was taken, with students evaluating their own performance against that of a peer. Consequently, the outcome of this determined whether the peer was considered ‘qualified’ to provide useful feedback. Peers deemed to be performing at a similar or higher level were regarded potential sources of acceptable feedback. Conversely, students said they would be very reluctant to engage with feedback from peers estimated to be performing at a lower level as they perceived that this would not be useful:

“But I would only want feedback from somebody a bit higher than me, because I want to know what they did, so I can benefit off them.”

“If it’s somebody who you’ve seen their stuff and you can see that there’s a lot of things wrong in theirs, then they’re telling you that you’re wrong, you’re kind of like, you are too, so how can you correct me?”

What is the timeframe for receiving feedback?

Students voiced differences in terms of the length of time between submitting work and obtaining feedback. Some students received their assessment feedback quickly and in time for the next assignment:

“My one would be handed in on a Friday night and then we’ve a seminar on Tuesday evening, so he gives us oral feedback then, but he gives us online feedback by Monday night so we know on Tuesday the questions we have for him.”

“In our modules I think they are very, very good at, you know, giving feedback before we get another assignment.”

However, a number of participants expressed frustration that the turnaround time on feedback was too long. One student said, “It will be at least a month and a half before you get anything back”, and that the absence of any feedback could potentially adversely impact on their ability to attempt future related assessments:

“We’re waiting on the results of an exam that we did back at Christmas and we’re doing a similar one now and nobody knows where to start, because we’ve no idea if we’re going to make the same mistakes.”

When discussing the variation in feedback waiting times, students did acknowledge factors that could impact on the speed of delivering feedback from the tutor or lecturer’s perspective, such as the size of the class. Large groups could pose more challenges, not only for turnaround times, but in terms of tailoring and personalising the feedback for each student:

“Our [redacted] lecturer corrects like two hundred and something tests. So it’s probably like hard for her to go give them all back out and go through everyone individually like you did this good but you could work on these ...”

“Mine is completely different, mine is really, really personal because our course is so small ...”

The context of the teaching and learning environment was additionally recognised as a contributing factor as to when feedback was given. Feedback on practical work (namely, labs, in-class presentations) compared to written work was evaluated more positively by some students, with a number further highlighting the immediacy of such feedback:

“Feedback on anything you do written is poor. Feedback on anything you do on practical I’d say is pretty good.”

“For [redacted] we got it straightaway didn’t we, we done a practical and he gave us our feedback straightaway as soon as we had done it.”

“Our [redacted] lecturer corrects like two hundred and something tests. So it’s probably like hard for her to go give them all back out and go through everyone individually like you did this good but you could work on these ...”

How is technology used to support assessment and feedback?

Submitting assessments

Students noted that submissions are increasingly been made through the VLE, often with the stipulation that work is also uploaded for processing by online similarity reporting software or text matching software to detect instances of plagiarism (e.g., Turnitin), or handed in as a paper copy also.

From a user perspective, students discussed becoming accustomed with the technology:

“It just takes time, like you’re not going to do it the first day you get into college.”

Although once mastered, students emphasised that the process of uploading assignments was “straightforward”. Others, however, did note a lack of training, in some instances, to help with the technology familiarisation process. A small number of students pointed to specific disadvantages of technology, such as for drawing: “If you had a hard copy you could actually just leave a space to draw in a little diagram”, or the impersonality of automated assessment:

“Technology isn’t really used with [redacted] at all. Like they will put up notes and the homework and stuff like that, but technology isn’t used as feedback.”

“Just some things are kind of hard to do online, like say [redacted] quizzes, because like you could have the slightest thing and it will just make the whole thing wrong like you will forget to do a bracket for say that should be there and then you get it all wrong whereas it was actually right. Where if it was a teacher or tutor that was correcting it, they would kind of know what you are doing or just because it is a definite answer on Moodle, it is kind of complicated.”

Returning to the use of text matching software, Turnitin is used in all four project institutions. As an overview of how Turnitin works, each piece of written work/assessment submitted is compared to web sources and an internal database. This generates a originality report and produces a report showing highlighted sections of text that are identical to those found in other texts. Of interest is that in each of the focus groups, students spontaneously talked about Turnitin when discussing feedback. It appeared that, for some students, the Turnitin similarity report itself constituted a source of feedback:

“It is good to get the plagiarism report and feedback straightaway.”

“The plagiarism report for us is actually very important because it is English history and politics, so the amount of quotations involved.”

Yet the comments also suggested that some students may be overly focusing on the percentages returned in the Turnitin report, even to the extent perhaps that the ‘need’ to obtain a particular ‘number’ may be impacting on the process of writing:

“But plagiarism it’s over a certain percentage isn’t it? ... It’s 30% for us, we are allowed 30% ... I think we are allowed 20% isn’t it? ... No ... I think it’s 45%.”

“It is so hard to do a decent essay under a certain percentage because you need to quote so much ...”

Despite the high use of online submissions, the majority of students also reported that hard copies of assignments also needed to be submitted (although it was not clear from the conversations whether hard copies formed the sole submission or supplemented the online submission). When comparing the perceived advantages of the various submission methods, one student remarked on the sense of reassurance associated with handing in a ‘paper version’ of an assignment:

“That is the only thing I prefer the hard copy because you know it is there you have put it in the box and that’s it gone.”

Similarly, another student spoke of the anxiety surrounding online submissions as to whether the submission process had been successfully completed or not:

“I always panic that it is not gone.”

Students are also aware of reliability issues related to online submissions, particularly the dangers of mass last-minute submissions, which are perceived to be the trigger for the system to fail:

“Sometimes the system crashes in [redacted] because there’s like 200 people trying to submit it at two minutes to twelve at night.”

Technology-enabled feedback

Participating student representatives reported little experience of feedback that is produced (by a lecturer/tutor) or accessed (by the learner) via digital technologies. This is despite the fact, as noted previously, that many report submitting assignments online. Where technology was employed, it mostly took the form of textual comments added to digital versions of work, or emails that linked to feedback uploaded to virtual platforms such as Moodle, including instances of marking files. There were also two examples cited of digital audio and video feedback being used:

“You get, like an email, saying you have feedback on your assignment, and then you can click into it.” [on Moodle]

“When you share something with your lecturer [in Google Docs] they see it and then they can go through it, correct it and suggest changes.”

“One lecturer I had last semester who actually attached a kind of marking text file with it, just came up with a table of your marks given for each kind of, to mark the topic on the assessment. Everyone else just leaves it there graded.”

“If you’ve seen things on YouTube, where they show you tutorials, that’s screencasted. So he just opens up Microsoft Office or whatever the essay you have, and he’ll go through it. But you can see what he’s pointing at and just talk over it. So it’s an audio-visual feedback.”

According to the students, the use of technology-provided feedback was lecturer-dependent. While a number of lecturers were singled out due to their innovation in using digital feedback, students also surmised that other lecturers may not want or may be unaware of how to use the available technology explicitly for feedback purposes:

“Like the facility is obviously there for online feedback but I don’t know whether lecturers don’t want to do it, or they don’t know how or how to put it across.”

“Technology isn’t really used with [redacted] at all. Like they will put up notes and the homework and stuff like that, but technology isn’t used as feedback.”

Student recommendations

Three core suggestions emerged from the discussions as to how the feedback experience could be enhanced for first year learners.

Firstly, students proposed that it would be helpful to have greater uniformity as to how feedback was provided across modules and disciplines (consistency was a frequently employed term here):

“It would be nice to have some kind of a continuance between [modules], there’s no point in us getting feedback in one module, it’d be nice to have ... consistency.”

“Same for every lecturer – every lecturer should have to do the same sort of – the same formality, not like “This one does this one, this one does that one ...” Every lecturer should have to sort of – OK, I suppose depending on the subject – but there should be a guideline at the end to follow on feedback.”

Secondly, a particular emphasis was placed on the need for guidance as opposed to grades alone:

“Instead of just getting grades the whole time I think we should get more comments.”

Lastly, students felt that feedback should be returned to them as quickly as possible, even if this meant a reduction in the volume of feedback that was provided. Moreover, students identified the need to be informed about circumstances that would prevent them from acquiring feedback (e.g., unavailability of lecturers), or result in a delay from staff in responding to requests for feedback:

“It would be great if you could get it straightaway [feedback] ... but I mean obviously they would need to have time to correct assignments ... they should be able to give you a few feedback points.”

“As you’re doing assignments, after each assignment you should get feedback, so that you can do you know ... you are not waiting three months for feedback.”

“I’ve emailed and emailed and emailed and now it’s like she’s a part-time lecturer so she’s not here so I think it should be made clear to them, you’re not going to see them again at least give them a little bit of feedback.”



Summary

It was clear that participants both wanted and valued feedback on their work and progress. Feedback is valued for its potential to improve future performance and for its psychological benefits, particularly motivation, affirmation and encouragement. Unsurprisingly therefore, these students emphasised the importance of the way feedback is framed and communicated.

The students reported considerable variability in the nature, content, usefulness and timeliness of feedback received and they generally explained this in terms of variability among lecturers. Indeed, when asked how feedback could be improved, greater consistency was one of the strongest recommendations.

In terms of using feedback, the students wanted constructive and specific guidance that could be used to help them improve.

However, the usability of the feedback is not the only factor as the students' performance goals are seen as important in determining engagement with feedback.

No single format of feedback was preferred, although written comments are popular owing to their permanence. For some students, oral feedback is viewed more favourably as it offers the opportunity to discuss and clarify with lecturers, but generally, students recommended a combination of written and oral feedback, and crucially, dialogue with the lecturers, as the ideal.

Informal, unstructured peer-to-peer feedback was reported, yet it was not always recognised by the students as feedback per se. That being said, the participants had very limited exposure to formal or structured peer assessment or feedback. They were somewhat sceptical about the value of formal peer feedback and generally considered that its usefulness would be determined by the identity and academic reputation of the peer providing the feedback. One possibility is that this may be linked to an understanding of feedback as guidance provided by someone more 'expert'.

The participants revealed that they frequently used digital technologies in the submission of their assessments but that they rarely received feedback in a digital format.

Students offered three key suggestions for improving feedback practices: greater consistency among lecturers in the provision of feedback; an increase in feedback comments; and more timely feedback. It is worth noting that the wider social context, and particularly, the relationships between lecturers and students, all seem to play a role in understanding the process of feedback.

Summary Findings

Feedback in First Year: A Landscape Snapshot

This study was undertaken to offer a snapshot of the current feedback practices across four institutions (Maynooth University, Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University and Dundalk Institute of Technology), and was based on the experiences reported by students and staff.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the self-selecting nature of participants, it is acknowledged that it may not be possible to generalise the findings presented in this document to a wider population.

Notwithstanding this, what is clear is that feedback processes and practices vary widely, but that students and staff agree that feedback has a pivotal role to play in learning.

Bringing together the student and staff data, this study yielded a number of findings that can be related to several facets of feedback.



Shared Appreciation of the Value of Feedback

There is a mutual appreciation by students and staff concerning the importance of feedback for learning. In particular, a future-orientated view of feedback appears to be taken by students and staff alike. Students value feedback for its potential to improve future work and for its psychological benefits, specifically in terms of motivation, affirmation and encouragement. Staff similarly recognise the importance of feedback, with almost all of the staff respondents concurring that feedback is integral to student learning.

Students' Experience of Feedback in First Year is Inconsistent

Across the participating institutions, the student experience of feedback provision in first year could be described as inconsistent. While there are positive feedback experiences, admittedly, there is considerable variation. For example, there are some references to delayed feedback, and to the absence of feedback entirely. In contrast, staff generally reported always providing feedback. One possible explanation for this disconnect is that feedback practitioners are over-represented in the current sample. It is also possible that students do not recognise some exchanges as feedback per se. Moreover, feedback is often perceived by students to be lecturer-dependent. A related point here is that a high percentage of the lecturers themselves reported having the sole responsibility for generating feedback; it tended not to be a shared undertaking.

Traditional Forms of Assessment Predominate

Outside of lab/practical related subjects, there seems to be a heavy reliance on assessment tasks that might reasonably be characterised as more traditional or mainstream in their usage. The most prevalently used assessments reported included written examinations, practical skills test, essays and multiple choice quizzes. Furthermore, the assessments were often individual rather than group based. Few staff or students reported using or experiencing peer assessment or feedback. However, it is important to keep in mind that the size of the class, especially in terms of large cohorts, in addition to disciplinary considerations (e.g., arts subjects compared to science subjects) are factors that may exert an influence on the decision regarding which assessment methods to adopt.

Feedback Approaches Are Lecturer Dependent

There is considerable diversity around feedback approaches amongst staff. Feedback practices are personal and connected to individual lecturer preferences. Written and oral methods (e.g., grades and comments returned on papers, one-to-one discussions or collective reviews), particularly those undertaken in-class, proved commonplace. Rubrics appeared to be less evident in use, although when they were employed, students did note advantages, especially in signposting what was required in the assessment task.

Somewhat unexpectedly, several students equated the reports generated by text matching software, such as Turnitin, to be a form of feedback in itself. From a practitioner perspective, at first sight, these types of reports might not automatically be categorised as feedback, yet the students in this study did identify them as such.

Grade as a form of Feedback

Grades are recognised as a form of feedback by students and staff. However, the staff perception that students are exclusively interested in the awarded grade would seem to be incorrect. Rather, students view grades alone as insufficient, with a strong preference revealed for more comments to clarify exactly where they are going wrong, and how they can/could improve in future assignments.

Dissatisfaction Around the Timing of Feedback

Overall, staff and student are dissatisfied with the timing of feedback. Students are acutely aware of the timing of feedback and often dissatisfied with the timings, which are often too late to impact the next assignment or future work. When feedback is provided quickly, this is appreciated. Having to make repeated requests for feedback, or receiving no feedback at all, are sources of discontent for students. However, students are also aware that the class size impacts the turnaround time of feedback and their

expectations seem to be mediated by this factor. Staff, for the most part, seemed to be attuned to the high value that students place on prompt feedback. Our collected data indicated that staff largely aimed to give feedback at least within three weeks of submission. Another implication of this is that perhaps staff should not underestimate the importance that students attribute to the clear and efficient communication of feedback practices (e.g., when feedback can be expected).

Shared Value for Feedback Conversations

Both students and staff value oral feedback and the chance to engage in a dialogue about the assessed work. Maybe it is not wholly unexpected that some students and staff like to discuss feedback in face-to-face contexts given that feedback was deemed by many students, and to various degrees, the staff as well, to be a personal experience.

Low Use of Peer Feedback

Few students or staff in this study reported any experience of taking part in, or using, *structured* peer feedback (that is, providing feedback to other students to fulfil a stipulated/ required module activity), this may help to possibly explain the variations in opinions about peer feedback. The tendency was to view peer feedback apprehensively.

Further, the perceived academic standing of the peer seemed to be a factor determining whether or not the feedback was valued and accepted. Assuming also that some students see feedback as being lecturer-dependent (a trend visible in this study), this may account for the mixed views surrounding peer feedback. However, the misgivings did not appear to extend to informal or voluntary feedback activities initiated by students themselves outside of the set module curriculum, for instance, study groups established on social media platforms such as Facebook.

Low Use of Technology Supported Feedback Approaches

Overall, e-submission seems more widely used than e-marking and e-feedback. Instances of technology-supported feedback, such as online written comments, creating digital audio files, videos, or screencasts tended to be the exception. Of the technology-supported approaches reported, the most commonly used feedback technology system is the VLE, Moodle, particularly the use of VLE Quizzes for automated feedback.

From a staff perspective, time pressures, training requirements in how to integrate the technology, and concerns over the reliability of the underlying technological infrastructure, emerged as reasons why technology might not be used to provide feedback. Some students voiced a sense of frustration about the lack of technology in use.

Similarly, students accredited the use of technology enabled feedback approaches to be lecturer dependent.

Challenges

Staff felt the pressures of trying to provide quality feedback under limited available time and existing, already-filled workloads. Large class sizes were also highlighted as a challenge to contend with, while others expressed concerns about low levels of student engagement with feedback. Staff highlighted the need for additional training in the use of different feedback methodologies, most notably, technology-based approaches.

Student Recommendations

To improve feedback practices in first year, students recommended:

- **Greater consistency across first year modules in terms of how feedback is provided**
- **Feedback content that offers helpful guidance designed to support improvement (as opposed to concentrating on grades alone)**
- **Shortening the time taken for feedback to be provided so that feedback is returned promptly following submission.**

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Appendix 1:

Student focus

group questions

Introductory profile questions

1. What class/ module/ programme group do you represent?
2. Tell us a little about the group you represent. How many students are in the group?

Students defining feedback – their view

1. So, what do you consider feedback to be?
2. What do you think is the purpose of feedback?
3. Do you think that students expect feedback for their various/ or all their assignments?

Assessment and assessment submission

1. What type of assignments do you do for continuous assessments?
2. How does your group usually submit continuous assessment assignments?
3. Generally, how do students find submitting work online?

Feedback and format

1. Does your group receive feedback on submitted continuous assessment work? If yes, tell me about/ describe how you receive this feedback.
2. Does your group receive feedback on draft assessments before final submission? If you do, tell me about how you receive feedback on draft work. How does it work?

3. Does your group receive feedback on final examinations?
If yes, describe how you receive feedback on either final examinations/ final assessments.
4. Generally, how is feedback given to your group (e.g., handed back in-class or via email, or do you have to collect it?)

Timing of feedback

1. How frequently/ often during the module does your group receive feedback? For example, in-class tests, feedback on an individual piece?
2. So, when you submit your assignment, when does your group generally receive feedback on the assessment? How soon after?

Feedback content

1. What kind of feedback does your group generally receive on submitted work? For example, grades, comments, written feedback, rubrics, oral, aural feedback?
2. Can you give an example of an assessment and what was in that feedback?

Technology-enhanced feedback

1. If feedback was provided in an online/ digital format, what online/ digital format was used to provide feedback?

2. Can you give an example of when your group received feedback online/ in a digital format?

How you use feedback

1. Do you think students in your group use feedback?
If yes, why? What kinds of feedback do you think is found useful?
If no, why is it not useful?
2. How do you think received feedback is used by students? What do they use it for?
3. Do you think the feedback received helps students in their understanding of the grade received?
4. Do you think the feedback received helps students in future assignments?
If yes, how?
If no, why?
5. Does your class have opportunities to discuss feedback with lecturers/ tutors?
If yes, how?
If no, why do you think that is the case?

Peer assessment feedback

1. Have your group ever participated in peer feedback?
If yes, how did it work?
If yes, what was your experience of giving and receiving peer feedback?

Views

1. Do you think feedback on assessment is important in first year?
2. In what format does your class prefer to receive feedback?
3. What makes good feedback?
4. Do you feel students are able to use the feedback they get/ do they understand it?
If not, what would help you utilise feedback better?
5. What type of feedback do you think students find most useful?
6. If you could make any changes to assessment feedback in first year, what would they be?

Any other comments

1. Have you any other comments you would like to make with regards to assessment feedback in first year?

Appendix 2:

Staff online survey

Project Information

This survey is part of the Supporting Transition: Enhancing Feedback in First Year Using Digital Technologies project (Y1Feedback). This is a collaborative project between Maynooth University, Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, and Dundalk Institute of Technology and is funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The project aims to identify and develop approaches to enhance feedback for first year students using digital technologies.

This survey represents the first phase of the project, which is to identify current assessment feedback practices in first year undergraduate programmes.

For the purpose of this survey, the term feedback is used to refer to both feedback and feed-forward guidance provided to students as part of the assessment process, both formative and summative, by lecturers, tutors or student peers.

Survey Guide

This survey is completed anonymously and you will not be asked for your name or institutional affiliation. The survey takes approximately 12-15 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate in this survey, click next to confirm your consent to participate and to complete the survey.

Data Protection

- All data collected will be treated in confidence and will be held anonymously and securely.
- Cookies, personal data stored by your web browser, are not used in this survey.

Thank you for your time and participation in this survey.

Kind regards,
Y1Feedback Project Team

For more information about the Y1Feedback project, please contact the project lead in your institution:

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Survey Questions

1. What is your subject area? (For example, English, Biology, Electronic Engineering).
2. Number of years teaching experience in higher education?
3. How many first year undergraduate modules are you currently teaching?
4. Please state how many students are in a typical first year undergraduate module that you teach.
5. In total, approximately how many first year undergraduate students are you currently involved in assessing?

6. Please indicate the frequency with which you use the following types of assessment in your first year undergraduate modules:

	Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Written examination					
Essay					
Oral examination					
Group project					
Individual project					
Practical skills test					
Laboratory report					
Multiple choice quiz/ questions					
Presentation					
Peer assessment					
Problem sheet/ homework					
Digital artefact creation (audio/ video/ web)					
Other please specify					

7. Please indicate the extent to which you use the following assessment submission formats in first year undergraduate modules:

	Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Paper copy					
Via Moodle					
Via Turnitin					
Google Drive/ Dropbox/ One Drive					
USB/ memory key					
Email					
Other please specify					

8. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

The purpose of feedback is to ...

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Provide information on assessed work in time to influence future tasks.					
Provide information to students about their learning.					
Prioritise areas for improvement for students with the greatest difficulties.					
Facilitate peer group discussion of feedback.					
Reflect on students' assessment responses to improve future teaching and assessment tasks.					
Clarify what good performance is.					
Other please specify					

9. In your first year undergraduate modules, how often is assessment feedback prepared for students on continuous assessment work?

Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Not applicable

10. In your modules, who typically provides feedback to first year students on continuous assessment work? Please select all that apply.

Lecturer (me)	Other lecturers	Tutors	Postgraduate tutors	Demonstrators	Not applicable
Other (please specify)					

11. When is assessment feedback usually provided to first year students on continuous assessment work?

During the assessment process	Within one week of assessment submission	Within two weeks of assessment submission	Within three weeks of assessment submission	Within four weeks of assessment submission	Not applicable
Other (please specify)					

12. Please indicate the frequency with which you use the following types of assessment feedback to provide feedback to first year students on continuous assessment work.

	Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Grade only					
Grade and brief comments					
Brief comments only					
Grade and significant written feedback					
A feedback template/ rubric					
Generic feedback to module group					
One-to-one discussions with students					
Consultation day					
Other please specify					

13. In what format do you typically provide assessment feedback to first year students on continuous assessment work? Please select all that apply.

Handwritten	Typed	Orally to individual students	Orally to a class group	Online	Not applicable
Other (please specify)					

14. How do your students generally access the feedback prepared for them?

One-to-one discussion	In-class	Collection from department	Via Moodle	Via Turnitin	Via email
Not applicable	Other (please specify)				

15. Is your assessment and feedback practice guided by assessment and feedback policies/ guidelines? Please select all that apply.

Departmental	Institutional	Professional	Not applicable	Other	Via email

16. Which of the following characteristics of feedback most align(s) with the focus of the feedback content you provide? Please select all that apply.

Acknowledges students' strengths	Acknowledges students' weaknesses	Corrects errors	Encourages further learning	Relates to assessment criteria	Provides feed-forward to influence future tasks
Focuses on grades	Other (please specify)				

17. Please indicate the frequency with which you use the following technologies to support the assessment feedback process.

Acknowledges students' strengths	Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Microsoft Word					
Email					
PDF annotation					
Digital audio					
Video					
Moodle grade book/ feedback comments					
Turnitin GradeMark					
Moodle rubric					
Moodle quiz					
Moodle wiki or blog					
Social media					
Other please specify					

18. Have you used peer (student-to-student) feedback as an assessment feedback approach in first year undergraduate modules?

Yes	No	If yes, please describe how you implemented peer feedback, including any technologies you may have used.

19. Do you provide formative feedback or feed-forward to students on non-graded work or participation?

Yes, regularly	Yes, sometimes	Don't know	Rarely	Never	Not applicable

20. What type of feedback do you typically provide to students on final module examinations? Select all that apply.

Grade only	Grade with brief comments	Brief comments only	Grade and significant written feedback	A feedback template/ rubric	Generic feedback to class/ group
One-to-one discussions with students	Consultation day	Not applicable	Other (please specify)		

21. On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 has no influence and 5 has strong influence), please rate how the following factors determine the extent and nature of the assessment feedback that you provide.

	1 Has no influence	2	3	4	5 Strong influence
Own workload					
Timing of assessments					
Student engagement with feedback					
The nature of the assessment (e.g., MCQ vs. essay)					
The standard of work produced by the student					
Your level of involvement in the module					
Relationship with students					
Own beliefs about the value of feedback					

22. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Feedback is an integral part of student learning.					
Students engage with the feedback provided.					
Students apply/ make use of feedback.					
Students seem to be only interested in the grade.					
Students value timely feedback.					
Peer feedback is a valuable learning experience for students.					
Students like to discuss feedback provided.					
Feedback practices should be made explicit to students.					
Preparing students for receiving feedback is important.					

23. What type of assessment feedback do you think works best for first year undergraduate students?
24. Please describe any barriers/ challenges (if any) you face in providing assessment feedback to first year undergraduate students.
25. Please describe any concerns you may have about using technology to support assessment feedback practices.
26. Do you have any other comments in relation to assessment feedback practices in first year undergraduate programmes?

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