Feedback to Students

1.   Background

There has been a steady increase in the Humanities overall percentage score for the National Student Survey (NSS) questions on Assessment and Feedback[1] from 51% in 2011 to 70% in 2015, which was 1% higher than the University's score (fourteen Russell Group universities achieved a higher score, with two equalling this score). The Faculty's target score, for this section of the survey, for 2015 was 87% rising to 90% by 2020.

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) also has a section on Assessment and Feedback[2]. In 2015, in Humanities, the overall score for this section was the lowest, although matching that of the University (67%).

When the information from the two external surveys is interrogated further it reveals a disparity across programmes in terms of the scores achieved on the assessment and feedback sections.

One of the Faculty's priorities for 2016/17 is to *'continue the on-going enhancement of the academic student experience for UG and PGT students, resulting in higher levels of satisfaction as measured by indicators such as the National Student Survey, Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, and the Unit Survey'* . One of the key actions in support of this priority is that the Faculty will '*work with Schools to continue to improve the quality and timeliness of feedback to UG and PGT students, demonstrated through a 2% rise in satisfaction for this area of student experience in both the NSS and the PTES.'*

The Associate Dean and Teaching and Learning Manager have met with academic staff, graduate teaching assistants and students to identify what they consider makes good feedback and how this can be used to inform students' learning.

Based on the findings of the above consultations, and similar activity undertaken at University level, this document identifies and recommends good practice on providing feedback to students and supporting their understanding of the ways in which feedback can drive their learning. The information provided is not intended to be prescriptive rather it is intended to provide information on desirable practice.

The text in *italics* in section 2 overleaf is reproduced from the University's [Policy on Feedback to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students.](#)

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[1] The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance; assessment arrangements and marking have been fair; feedback on my work has been prompt; I have received detailed comments on my work; feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.

[2] The criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance; assessment arrangements and marking have been fair; feedback on my work has been prompt; feedback on my work (written and oral) has been useful; I received feedback in time to allow me to improve my next assignment; I have received detailed comments (written and oral) on my work; feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.

**2.	Policy on Feedback to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students** (approved by Senate 28/04/10)

The University of Manchester is committed to providing timely and appropriate feedback to students on their academic progress and achievement, thereby enabling students to reflect on their progress and plan their academic and skills development effectively. Feedback, and acting on feedback, is therefore part of the active learning process throughout a student's course of study.

Methods of feedback will vary according to assessment type, discipline, level of study and the needs of the individual student.

This policy applies to undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision. It sets out the principles under which feedback should be planned and delivered and relates to both formative and summative work. A glossary of terms can be found as Appendix 1 of this document.

Principles

*1.	Feedback must be provided in a timely manner that helps students understand (i) the marks or grades they have received for the work submitted, and (ii) how their performance might be improved in future.*

Late feedback can negate the usefulness of the feedback; section 10 of the Policy details the timing of feedback which must be adhered to.

*2.	Feedback must be as personal as possible to the individual student to enable reflection on individual skills and performance.*

Feedback should be on the work alone and not on the student (i.e. not personal); comments such as 'not enough effort…' is not a comment on the work but an assumption about the student, who may well have worked hard. A good way to ensure that the feedback is about the work is to use the marking criteria as a framework for providing your feedback.

*3.	Students have a responsibility to consider feedback given on their work, to seek to understand it, and to act on it.*

Feedback assists students in developing mastery of their subject and more general graduate attributes. However, students do not always fully understand or feel distanced from the marking process on their course. Students have stated that they feel frustrated by the fact that the full marking range is not used across all assessment methods and across course units / degree programmes.

Feedback is meaningful when it is specific enough for students to understand how to improve and gain a better mark. Understanding the marking process, criteria and grade descriptors used for each assessment helps students understand what the requirements are. Students who understand their feedback are more likely to use it to drive their learning and become more effective lifelong learners who are able to review, monitor and evaluate their own learning.

In order to support students in helping them to understand their feedback and be able to act on it, you can:

- discuss with students the intended learning outcomes (ILOs), assessment criteria, grade descriptors and marking criteria (which should all be written in a way that is understandable to students) and how your feedback will relate to and reflect the language of these criteria;
- discuss with students past examples of assignments (both good and poor) and how the marking criteria had been applied;
- get students to examine past assignments and evaluate these against the assessment and marking criteria and grade descriptors and discuss this with them before they attempt an assignment;
- have a class discussion about commonly made mistakes;
- get students to write a small (c.500 word) piece which is then peer reviewed against the assessment and marking criteria and grade descriptors;
- carry out a trial session of submitting students' work to the University's plagiarism detection system in order to demonstrate to students how work can be checked for originality,
- discuss with students how they can use and follow-up on the feedback they receive;
- discuss with students how they can apply the feedback they receive on coursework to examinations;
- let students know the format of any feedback they will receive (see section 5 below).

Policies relating to the operational delivery of feedback to students

Communicating the feedback process

4.   Unit teachers are responsible for providing programme directors, or equivalent, with details of how feedback will be provided on their unit. The feedback mechanisms adopted should be capable of review by external examiners, processes for peer review and periodic review.

Particular care needs to be taken in programmes such as Joint Honours programmes, where units are drawn from multiple disciplines/Schools or Faculties. A common concern voiced by students on such programmes is the perception that they are treated differently by different parts of their programme. Therefore the effective use of vertical and horizontal curriculum planning is particularly important to ensure that students understand how the different elements of the programme fit together, to avoid assessment clashes, and to make sure that the assigned academic adviser is able to effectively advise students on their academic development and attainment in all components of the programme.

5.   At the start of each academic year students should be informed of the feedback opportunities available in that year and the main goals of feedback at that stage in their studies. Information must be provided in programme handbooks, unit outlines and course materials to inform students of the mechanisms by which they will receive feedback and the forms it will take for both formative and, where appropriate, summative work. The Blackboard page for each unit should have a clear section explaining the feedback mechanism that the unit will follow. At the start of each unit, the unit teacher(s) should explain how and when feedback will be provided during the unit.

It is important to manage student expectations with regard to feedback. There are three main points that should be communicated to students by programme and unit leaders:
• What form/s feedback will take on that specific unit/programme.
• The timescale for the return of feedback on submitted work and/or the process by which continuous feedback will be delivered (for example, on technical skills in laboratories).
• How the feedback ought to be used by the recipient.

Setting expectations so that the students' expectations can be aligned with yours is particularly important

in terms of those students transitioning from college to university (becoming more independent learners) and from studying their undergraduate degree at a different institution (where the practice may have been different). However it is still essential to set expectations so all students are aware of the areas listed in the bullet points above.

Students particularly tend to think of feedback as meaning only written comments on pieces of assessment. It is helpful to discuss with students the different form(s) of feedback that they will receive during your course unit, so that they recognise when feedback (other than in the written form), either individually or on a group basis, is being given.

It is also beneficial to set out the marking process, in handbooks etc., so that students' misconceptions are rectified.

6.   An opportunity must exist in all units for formative feedback.

Formative assessment allows students the opportunity to try out and practice knowledge, skills and understanding before they are summatively assessed, ergo formative feedback can be used by students to develop academic and transferable skills. Good feedback should always be formative.

Formative assessments afford students the opportunity to practice without penalties. Students have expressed the view that this is valuable only if accompanied by useful feedback and if the formative assessments are aligned with the summative assessments.

Students have stated that feedback on presentations, even if not part of the assessment for the unit would be particularly useful.

7.   It is a key duty of Academic Advisors that they reinforce the feedback mechanisms that exist on a programme and allow the opportunity for students to clarify their understanding of the purpose of feedback.

The University's Academic Advising Model and accompanying documentation have useful information on identifying, prioritising and recording actions as a result of feedback, see
http://www.tlso.manchester.ac.uk/advising/academicadvisingmodel/

Grading as a part of feedback

8.   Students should be given clear information on the assessment process and the grading criteria applied to each assessment. Grade descriptors used should be consistent across the units in a given programme and should be readily accessible to students in unit and programme handbooks or equivalent. Assignment of a grade is an important aspect of feedback and should be provided wherever possible. Schools should also expedite the adoption of a common set of grade descriptors across all programmes in a manner to be informed by the forthcoming review of degree regulations and assessment policies.

The provision of a grade is important for students. It helps them to position themselves within their cohort and to plan their academic development with reference to attainment in particular modes of assessment and to judge their general progress. However any grades provided must be meaningful to the student and

standards of grading should be consistently applied across a programme of study. The consistent use of grading descriptors is strongly encouraged. Feedback on assessments, whether formative or summative, should indicate areas for improvement that relate to the grade given so that students can make use of the feedback to improve their attainment level in other units.

Timescales for the delivery of feedback to students

9.   Feedback must be timely and students must be made aware of the timetable for submission deadlines and dates on which feedback will be returned for each unit.

The timing of feedback must be such that the feedback can be used by the student to respond and improve performance in a unit and throughout their programme.

Providing timely feedback enables students to apply the feedback to subsequent pieces of work, by continually referring to the feedback as they review their work in progress.

Schools should give consideration to submission dates for coursework to ensure that where appropriate the schedule for submission and feedback fits with the relevant dates for future assessment.

It should be accepted that appropriate timing for feedback depends on the nature of the unit. The following points may be useful when considering when feedback would be most appropriately delivered:
• If feedback will be helpful in further assessed work set within the timeframe of the unit then clearly feedback will need to be delivered earlier.
• If feedback will be most useful to inform performance in end of unit examinations that take place a number of weeks after teaching has ended, then it may be more appropriate to collect work for feedback nearer the end of the unit.
• Nothing in this policy prohibits multiple feedback points within a unit. However, care should be taken to ensure a balance between the time needed to deliver the unit and students' ability to assimilate knowledge, against the time needed to undertake the work to be submitted for feedback.

10.   For all formative assessments and assessed coursework, feedback will normally be provided within 15 working days after the final submission deadline or exceptionally, and subject to prior approval by the faculty, within 20 working days after the final submission deadline; extensions to 20 working days will be approved on academic grounds only and must be clearly communicated to students in advance.

For single pieces of assessed work carrying a credit weighting of 30 credits or more, the maximum time for feedback to be given is normally 30 working days after the final submission deadline.

In cases where these requirements would extend beyond the end of a taught programme then paragraphs 16 and 17 will apply.

The timing of feedback must be such that the feedback can be used by the student to respond and improve performance in a unit and throughout their programme. Feedback should be seen as a learning tool. Good and timely feedback can motivate students and allows them to apply it to future assessments and learning.

Schools should give consideration to submission dates for coursework to ensure that where appropriate the schedule for submission and feedback fits with the relevant dates for future assessment.

If, for exceptional reasons, the timescale for returning feedback needs to be extended the affected

students need to be informed of the new date and the general reason for the alteration to the published date.

It is useful for students to receive feedback on their dissertation (or equivalent) even though this is normally examined at the end of the programme and they may not be undertaking further study at the University. The feedback can be useful if they are to continue with their studies here or elsewhere or for CPD purposes in their jobs.

11.   Schools should have a clear policy to handle feedback on late submissions.

Late submissions should still be marked and feedback provided. The feedback should reflect the mark achieved before the late submission penalty was imposed.

Delivery of feedback to students

12.   Opportunities must be provided for students to discuss feedback in person with the unit teacher/s.

Students, especially in the first year of their programme, don't understand the purpose and benefit of office hours. It is beneficial to explain to students how they can utilise your office hour to discuss, for example, the feedback they have received on written work and guidance on academic progress and any preparation they need to do in advance of the meeting.

Students should be given advice on how to interpret feedback comments and be able to ask questions if the feedback given is not clear to them.

13.   Pursuant to principle 1, comments should be made on why students were awarded the given mark and how they can improve their work, including any recommendations for further reading where appropriate.

Feedback should be clear, unambiguous, concise and objective.

Students criticised feedback which is too vague. Simply highlighting sections of the text, or adding exclamation marks, ticks or question marks or one word comments e.g. 'good' are not helpful to students in using the feedback to improve their work. Equally stating, for example, 'this essay is poorly structured' is far less helpful than 'you need to look at how you structure your work and consider how you can ensure that each point leads to the next in a coherent way'.

Each student must feel that appropriate consideration has been given to their piece of work and their personal development as a learner.

Students have identified the following as unhelpful feedback:
- just a percentage and no comments (exams);
- grades which do not match the comments given;
- feedback that doesn't suggest ways to improve;
- only pointing out the fault but not showing how could be improved;
- vague comments like 'improve structure' that doesn't indicate how and where;
- late feedback.

Your feedback should relate to the intended learning outcomes and key skills identified in the course unit specifications and the marking criteria / rubric.

The wording of your feedback and the mark awarded need to be aligned. Your feedback should be written in plain language so it can be easily understood enabling the student to engage with it. Ensuring your comments are linked to the areas in the rubric / marking criteria will help students to understand how you have come to the mark awarded.

As well as informing students on how they can improve their work it is also important to note what they have done well and why so that they can replicate this success in future work.

Students have stated the following as helpful feedback:
- examples of extra reading;
- redirecting to the exact lecture / class the question was taken from;
- clear and simple examples;
- bullet points of ways to improve.

14.   *Constructive criticism should be the overriding feedback style.*

Constructive feedback should provide positive suggestions for improvement and needs to be concise, focussed and meaningful, highlighting what is going well and what can be improved in order to feed forward.

It is good practice, when suggesting what can be improved, to identify no more than three areas of the work (a longer list may lead to a student ignoring all the advice). These three areas should:
- be the key things that could make a difference to the quality of a student's future work;
- be achievable;
- refer to material which the student can access.

Sandwiching negative feedback between positive feedback is simple but effective.

15.   *Opportunities for feedback should be comparable in scope and scale between students and between units that are similar in style or structure.*

Feedback on Examinations

16.   *Schools must facilitate individual student requests to see exam scripts and coursework, without charge, although students will not be permitted to take the scripts away with them.*

17.   *Written comments should be provided for all exam scripts and coursework and must be clear and legible. These comments may be provided in a separate document but should enable students to understand to which part of their work comments refer. Students should have the opportunity, within reason, to seek clarification and further feedback; however students are reminded that there can be no appeals concerning matters of academic judgement.*

Because of the normally summative nature of examinations, formative comments are often seen as inappropriate. However t*here is still a lot that students can reflect upon about their performance in end of unit examinations in order to improve their results for future units, such as learning from their examination performance therefore feedback on this type of assessment is still important even though it tends to take*

place at the end of a unit of study.

Following the marking of the examination you could prepare a summary of the common misconceptions, the strengths and weaknesses and any good practice exhibited and why, which you can then discuss with the next cohort on your unit prior to them undertaking the examination. Please note that generic feedback is only acceptable as additional feedback.

It is recommended that the provision of feedback opportunities should form part of both vertical and horizontal curriculum and assessment planning to ensure that there is consistency of approach across the programme.

Appendix 1: Glossary of terms used in the Policy on Feedback to Students

- **Formative assessment:** *Assessment that does not contribute to the final mark of a unit. Formative assessment focuses on measuring progress to date and feedback on formative assessments should enable the recipient to develop and improve before completing summative assessments.*
- **Formative Feedback:** *Feedback that enables the recipient to develop and improve with the unit and/ or programme of study.*
- **Summative assessment:** *Assessment that contributes to the final mark of a unit. Summative assessment can include both coursework and examinations. The completion of all required elements of summative assessments normally indicates the end of a unit of study.*
- **Coursework:** *Assignments completed and marked outside of examination conditions which may or may not contribute to the final mark of a unit. Types of coursework include essays, report, in-class tests, laboratory work, projects, dissertations, practical work, and presentations.*
- **Assessed Coursework:** *Coursework which contributes to the final mark of a unit.*
- **Academic Advisor:** *The member of academic staff who has responsibility for providing academic development guidance to a specific student or group of students. Each student should be informed of the named individual who is their academic advisor*
- **Grade Descriptor:** *Description of the learning processes and outcomes demonstrated by a student in order to attain a particular grade.*
- **Constructive criticism:** *Feedback designed to enable an individual to understand and learn from their mistakes and to build on demonstrated strengths.*
- **Working day:** *Monday to Friday excluding student vacation periods and University examination periods.*
- **Vertical curriculum planning:** *Structuring the curriculum to ensure that units at higher levels build on the skills and knowledge acquired at the lower levels. Clear and transparent vertical planning can help students to make informed choices about their curriculum pathway.*
- **Horizontal curriculum planning:** *Planning the curriculum to ensure that there is minimal duplication between units at the same level and that connections are made between content and skills acquisition in different units within the same broad programme of study to enable students to have a clear understanding of the structure of their programme of study. This includes planning important dates with the academic year to avoid unnecessary clashes in the submission of assessed coursework.*