

Giving Effective Feedback to Students & Helping Them Understand It – 5 Steps
Faculty of Humanities

Background

One of the Faculty's priorities for the academic year 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.'*

During the academic year 2015/16, the Associate Dean and Teaching and Learning Manager 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 provides tips on providing feedback to students and supporting their understanding of the ways in which feedback can drive their learning.

'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' (Policy on Feedback to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students).

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

Tips:

- 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.

2. 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.

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.

Tips:

- discuss with your 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 your students past examples of assignments (both good and poor) and how the marking criteria had been applied
- get your 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 your 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 your students how they can use and follow-up on the feedback they receive
- discuss with your students how they can apply the feedback they receive on coursework to examinations
- let your students know the format of any feedback they will receive.

3. 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.

It is important to manage student expectations with regard to feedback. 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).

Tips:

- discuss with your 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
- set out the marking process, in handbooks etc., so that students' misconceptions are rectified

4. 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 & objective.

Tips:

- 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 ILOs, key skills in the rubric / marking criteria will help students to understand how you have come to the mark awarded
- Ensure that the wording of your feedback and the mark awarded align
- Explain statements such as 'lack of analysis', rather than assume the student will understand
- Rather than stating 'this essay is poorly structured' it is far more helpful to state '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'
- Note what the student has done well and why so that they can replicate this success in future work
- suggest examples of extra reading
- give clear and simple examples

5. 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.

Tips:

- when suggesting what can be improved, identify no more than three areas of the work (a longer list may lead to a student ignoring all the advice)
- make criticism less personal by using 'your work' rather than 'you'
- provide bullet points of where and how they can improve
- sandwich negative feedback between positive feedback

The University's [Policy on Feedback to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students](#) sets out the principles under which feedback should be planned and delivered and relates to both formative and summative work.