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## Can we meet their expectations? Experiences and perceptions of feedback in first year undergraduate students

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Student ratings of satisfaction with feedback are consistently lower than other teaching and learning elements within the UK higher education sector. However, reasons for this dissatisfaction are often unclear to teaching staff, who believe their students are receiving timely, extensive and informative feedback. This study explores possible explanations for this mismatch between staff and students' perceptions of feedback quality. One hundred and sixty-six first year undergraduate students completed a questionnaire detailing their experiences of feedback on coursework before and throughout their first year at university. Results indicate that whilst procedural elements of feedback (timeliness and legibility) are considered satisfactory, past experiences (pre-university) may influence student expectations of feedback. Some students had a severe, negative emotional response to the feedback provided and few students engaged in self-help (independent learning) behaviours to improve their performance following feedback. We consider how changes in feedback practices could improve students' use of, and satisfaction with, their feedback.

**Keywords:** feedback perceptions; feedback experiences; undergraduates; emotional responses

### Introduction

The National Student Satisfaction Survey has revealed that students are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of feedback they receive (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] 2009, 32; Krause et al. 2005), highlighting procedural elements (e.g. timeliness and legibility), the level of guidance offered and the lack of understanding of comments, as issues of particular concern. However, although students are reporting dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive, it would appear that this view is not shared by teaching staff (Carless 2006), who generally believe that feedback is of a high quality and more comprehensive than in the past. As good feedback is essential for student improvement in the higher education (HE) setting (Price et al. 2010) and a key feature of 'best practice' in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson 1999), it is important that student perceptions, expectations and understanding of their feedback is carefully considered.

One of the main aims of giving feedback is to provide specific information to help close the gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood (Sadler 1989) and so help to achieve a desired grade outcome (Weaver 2006).

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Therefore, if feedback is to be effective it must engage the student and develop self-regulated learning, encouraging students to work towards their own academic goals (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). Previous research suggests that the development of self-regulated learning skills can be hampered when students focus solely on the grade an assignment has been awarded, with students comparing their results to others (ego-involvement) rather than focusing on their own learning (task-involvement) to improve their performance (Butler 1987). Therefore, the focus of feedback should move away from a judgement on a student's level of achievement (giving a grade) and should include more information (including both critical and positive comments) which enable the student to reflect, develop and improve his or her performance (MacClellan 2001). Although the key aim of feedback would therefore appear to be to engage the student in self-directed learning, it is unclear whether this is what students actually expect from their feedback. Poor satisfaction with feedback is likely to occur if students see the feedback as an end in itself and do not work independently with the feedback provided to improving their performance.

Attempts at improving student satisfaction with feedback have looked at procedural elements, such as legibility and timeliness (e.g. Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001; Rae and Cochrane 2008). Findings suggest that the more quickly clear and legible feedback is returned to a student, the stronger its effect on learning (Narasimhan 2001). As *written* feedback on completed assessments continues to play a major role in student development (NUS Student Experience Report 2008, 16), illegible feedback is of no benefit to the student (Price et al. 2010).

In addition to the procedural issues, changes within the UK HE sector may also influence student feedback satisfaction. The previous Labour government policy of widening participation (Gorard et al. 2006) has led to an increase in numbers of students from more diverse backgrounds and it is uncertain whether these students are starting university with the same skills set as seen in the past. In addition, changes in teaching methods employed in pre-university teaching in the UK have led to a perceived weakening of the core skills which students need for university (Cook, Rushton, and Macintosh 2006). As a result, tutors within the HE setting can no longer assume that previously successful feedback practices are still effective, with students requiring additional support during their first year in order to develop the skills needed to interpret and utilise feedback successfully. As a result poor satisfaction with feedback is likely to occur if the feedback provided cannot be used and so does not meet the needs of the current, more diverse cohort of students.

Students' inexperience in interpreting feedback can lead to misinterpretation of comments and an unfamiliarity with the implicit assumptions made by tutors (Lea and Street 2000; Mutch 2003), resulting in the ineffective use of feedback (Ramsden 1992). Indeed, students often report a lack of clarity about what is expected of them (Bowl 2003) and are often scared to meet with their tutors (Brown 2007), leading to mutual frustration; with tutors thinking that students are indifferent to their comments and are 'only interested in the grade' (Stothart 2008; Wojtas 1998). However, even if students are able to 'decode' the feedback given on assignments, students may not understand the academic discourse surrounding their feedback or may not have the strategies to use the comments made on their work (Burke 2009; Richardson 2005). Feedback should, therefore, not only outline academic weakness but should provide the student with the skills to use the feedback (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). If students do not have the skills needed to use the feedback provided, they may fail to engage in the process, which in turn means that

tutors' time is not being used effectively and meaningfully. Therefore, students may feel dissatisfaction with their feedback, not because they are not receiving good feedback, but because they lack the necessary skills to use the feedback provided.

One of the reasons students struggle to use the feedback provided in HE is because it can be very different to feedback which they have previously experienced within the education system. The skills needed to engage in self-directed learning may not have been sufficiently developed as previous educational experiences may have encouraged an over-dependency on the teacher. The over-dependence can then result in an inability on the part of students to be critical of their own work and so fail to develop self-help behaviours (Black and Wiliam 1998). For example, Weaver (2006) found that only 4% of students used a study skills book for guidance on how to respond to their feedback. Indeed, less effective learners have been found to adopt minimal self-regulation strategies, and depend much more on external factors (such as the teacher or the task) for feedback (Zimmerman 1989). As a result, less effective learners will rarely seek to incorporate feedback in ways that will enhance their future learning. Over-reliance on the lecturer to aid the feedback process, perhaps as a result of previous educational experiences, may therefore lead to dissatisfaction with feedback as students feel that they are not being as well supported by their tutor as previously in the education system.

Another point to consider is that students are now paying higher fees. It has been suggested that feedback dissatisfaction is a symptom of the more consumerist view (Stothart 2008) and that students now have increased expectations. However, paying fees may also increase the amount that some students are sacrificing to come to university and hence increase their motivations to succeed. Indeed, whereas the academic value of feedback is well recognised (Weaver 2006), the emotional impact of receiving feedback is not as well understood (Holford and Griffin 2003). Indeed, feedback received within the first year of study is especially likely to cause an emotional reaction (Hyland 2000). Students may have insecurities about whether they will be able to cope with the academic demands of university life. As a result, positive feedback can aid transition to studying at university by offering reassurance to a student of their ability to complete work at degree level (Poulos and Mahony 2008). Conversely, receiving negative feedback can be distressing, especially for the first year students. Negative comments can leave students with a sense of embarrassment and humiliation (Boud and Falchikov 2007) and with reduced levels of motivation (Hounsell et al. 2006; Kernis, Brocker, and Frankel 1989). This can be especially true for students with low self-esteem (Young 2000) or those who believe that their ability to improve is limited (Dweck 2000). Reduction in motivation can in turn be a barrier to students using feedback as they fail to commit to the self-regulation of learning (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). As a result of this observation, this study will consider whether dissatisfaction with feedback could be a result of feedback failing to play a critical role in the emotional support of students. Perhaps, one key role of feedback which should be considered is that of feedback acting as a form of reassurance to those students who have invested a great deal of both time and money to study in HE.

The key aim of this study is therefore to consider the factors which influence first-year students' satisfaction with feedback. A questionnaire examined student experiences of the procedural elements of feedback, students' emotional responses to feedback, and students' understanding and subsequent actions to address issues arising from their feedback. In addition, an experimental design was implemented

using a mock essay to investigate the impact of grade and the amount of feedback comments on students' perceptions of the satisfaction with the feedback.

Overall, this study aims to consider all factors which may affect student feedback satisfaction and how student satisfaction can be improved within the current HE environment.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and sixty-six ( $F=128$ ;  $M=38$ ) first year undergraduate psychology students took part in the study from one cohort entry. All students were undertaking core first year psychology modules at a post-1992 university in the North West of England.

Ethical approval for this study was given by the departmental ethics board. Students were asked to participate during a timetabled seminar session towards the end of formal Year 1 teaching, six weeks before the examination period. Eight students chose to participate in the teaching activity but did not wish to have their responses included in the study.

### *Measures*

At the time of study, at least seven pieces of marked coursework had been returned to each student. In the first part of the study, students were asked to complete a questionnaire detailing their experiences of feedback on this work. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 20 items: 19 closed question items and 1 open question. The first three closed questions related to demographic factors (age, gender and degree type). A further 16 closed questions related to students' experience of feedback and responses were made via a forced choice tick response with 3–6 possible responses. For example, 'Has written feedback been useful to help you to improve the standard of your work?' with the responses 'Always', 'Usually', 'Sometimes', 'Never'. The final open-ended question asked students to 'comment on any other aspect of feedback that you feel we could include in order to improve our provision in the future'.

In the second part of the study, students were presented with a 1000-word mock essay which had been prepared by an experienced lecturer and were asked to imagine that they were the author. Students were then asked to review and rate their satisfaction with the feedback provided. In order to examine the impact of grade and extensiveness of comments on students' feedback satisfaction, students were randomly assigned to read one of four identically written mock essays. Each of the four essays had differing amounts of written feedback comments with either extensive or limited written comments on the feedback sheet and on the actual essay. The mock essay grade was either low (48%) or high (62%) grade. Students spent around 20 minutes reading the essay and feedback comments before giving their opinions on the feedback comments as if they had been the author of the essay. Students gave their observations on the essay feedback via a nine-item questionnaire which included eight closed question items (with 3–4 possible responses). For example 'How well can you understand the feedback?' with the responses 'Very easily', 'There are some parts I cannot understand', 'I can understand very little of the feedback' or 'I understand none of it'.



### ***Procedure***

One hundred and seventy-four first year undergraduate psychology students were asked to complete the two parts of the study outlined above during a two-hour seminar session. There was no time limit on either of the exercises. Students were asked to complete each exercise independently, without discussion with their peers. Different class groups received different mock essays so there was no chance to compare feedback and mark on the mock essay within each study group. The exercise was part of the content of the seminar, but students did not have to submit their questionnaires for inclusion in the study if they did not want to (eight students chose not to be included in the study).

### **Results**

Data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v17 and analysed using Pearson correlations, *t*-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). A qualitative content analysis was conducted on responses to open-ended questions.

#### ***Procedural elements of feedback***

##### *Timeliness*

Students were generally satisfied with the timeliness of their feedback with 92% of students reporting that their assignments are returned within 15 working days (in keeping with their institution's requirement for the return of coursework). However, some students noted on the open-ended question that they would like their feedback sooner than 15 days.

##### *Legibility*

To be useful it is important that feedback can be easily read. The majority of feedback provided to these students is hand-written rather than electronic. Results indicate that 71.1% of our students report that their feedback is always or usually legible. However, this does indicate that approximately 30% (or 50 students) in our sample felt that sometimes the feedback that they receive is not legible, which is of concern.

##### *Feedback experience*

With regard to quality of feedback, 35.5% of students report better feedback at university than pre-university experiences. 28.9% report the same quality, with 34.9% of students reporting poorer feedback than that received pre-university. With regard to amount of feedback, 33.1% of students report more feedback at university, 41.6% report the same and 24.7% report less feedback than previously received. These results indicate that students have a wide variation in previous experiences of feedback.

Further analyses revealed that these differences in previous experience did impact on student perceptions of feedback at university. Significant relationships were found between students' opinions of quality and amount of pre-university written feedback and that received throughout their first year of university study. Students who reported 'worse than expected' quality and amount of written feedback at university were also more likely to report 'poorer quality and amount of feedback pre-university' (quality:  $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; amount:  $r = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

***Students' emotional response to feedback***

When asked their initial reactions to reading feedback (a question to which they were allowed to make multiple responses), 75.9% of students enjoyed reading feedback, 30.7% were apprehensive when first looking at returned work, 16.3% reported that they had been upset when receiving at least one piece of work back (although they could understand how to improve their work in the future). 6.6% of students reported that they had been upset when receiving back a piece of work and they did not know how to improve it in the future.

There were significant differences between students who had and had not reported being upset when receiving work back. Those students who reported being upset had less grade satisfaction ( $t(164)=3.28, p=0.001$ ), reported 'worse quality of feedback than expected' ( $t(164)=1.99, p=0.049$ ) and were more likely to judge the feedback they had received during the year as less useful in helping to improve future work ( $t(164)=2.63, p=0.009$ ). Reports of being upset when receiving feedback did not affect satisfaction with the amount of feedback ( $t(164)=0.55, p=0.585$ ), and comparisons with pre-university quality ( $t(163)=0.51, p=0.612$ ) and pre-university amount of feedback ( $t(163)=1.17, p=0.245$ ).

***Students' understanding of feedback***

On the questionnaire all but one of the students in our sample reported that they always read their feedback. However, when further asked to indicate all strategies that they used to improve their work in the future, in addition to reading their feedback comments, only 5.4% of students said that they would use a website, 34.9% would use a study skills textbook and 39.8% would arrange a meeting to go through their work with their personal tutor (even though all students are actively encouraged to see their personal tutors with all pieces of returned coursework). Fifty-one percent of students reported doing little other than reading the feedback on assignments.

There was little difference in students' use of study books or visits to personal tutors in those students who reported that feedback was only 'sometimes' or 'never' useful (55 students). Only 3.6% of this group reported that they would consider using a study skills website, 36.4% would use a study skills book, 38.2% would see their tutor and 52.7% would do little other than read their feedback, even though they considered it not always to be useful.

***Mock essay***

In the second part of the study, students were presented with one of four mock essays with differing amounts of written feedback (extensive, limited) and differing grades (high, low). Students were then asked to give their opinions on the feedback comments as if they had been the author of the essay. Feedback comments contained a mixture of critical and positive comments as would typically be found on student's coursework.

An independent  $t$ -test revealed that students who received a mock essay which had been awarded a grade of 62% would have been significantly happier with the grade than those whose mock essay received a grade of 48% ( $t(136)=7.29, p < 0.001$ ). This result suggests that the grade manipulation was successful.

An overall quality of feedback score was compiled for each student from the four aspects of feedback investigated; 'How well can you understand the feedback (very easily, some parts I cannot understand, I can understand very little, I understand none of it)', 'How informative is the feedback (very, quite, slightly, not at all)', 'Amount of feedback (too much, about right, too little)' and 'Does the feedback provide ideas for improvement (plenty of ideas, a few indications, little help)'. A maximum score of 14 could be obtained.

A  $2 \times 2$  between subject factorial ANOVA (grade of essay: high, low  $\times$  amount of feedback: limited, extensive) revealed that there was no significant main effect of grade ( $F(1,152)=0.22$ ,  $p=0.636$ ,  $\eta^2=0.001$ ), suggesting that those obtaining a high grade essay were perceiving the feedback in much the same way as those receiving a low grade essay. However, there was a significant main effect of feedback ( $F(1,152)=113.46$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.427$ ), indicating that those who received more feedback on the essay did value this feedback, irrespective of the mark awarded. There was no significant interaction between grade awarded and extensiveness of feedback ( $F(1,152)=0.10$ ,  $p=0.748$ ,  $\eta^2=0.001$ ).

### *Responses to open-ended questions*

At the end of the survey element of the study, students were asked to provide comments on any aspects of feedback they had received over the year which they felt would be useful to improve future provision. All student comments were typed verbatim into a spreadsheet and a quantitative content analysis performed (Silverman 2006, 159). The set of categories into which the comments were sorted were determined by the previously stated aims of the study: procedural issues, emotional responses and understanding.

#### *Procedural issues*

Eleven comments fell into this category and can be summed up by one exemplar: 'writing often not legible'. This reflects the finding reported earlier, that 30% of students felt that feedback was sometimes not legible. There were no comments related to other aspects of procedural issues, such as timeliness.

#### *Students' emotional responses*

A small number of students mentioned having an emotional response to feedback. The four comments made can be summed up by one student who suggested providing 'a list of common problems'. The provision of a generic list of common problems could remove the emotional responses to feedback by depersonalising the comments and highlighting to the student how many mistakes they had *avoided* making.

#### *Students' understanding of feedback*

After initial coding, it became clear that this category was quite diverse, and would benefit from division into sub-categories if the nature of the comments was to be reliably reflected. The sub-categories devised were: lack of information about how to improve work (26 comments), consistency between markers (25) and requests for verbal feedback (2).



The largest group of comments related to *lack of information about how to improve work*. Example comments in this category include ‘explain how to boost next mark’, ‘more direction on how to improve’ and ‘give suggestions’. There seems within this group to be a split between those students who are working well and want to know how to make their work even better and the second group who feel that they have been given insufficient information about how to rectify the mistakes which have been noted by the marker. The next largest group under this heading was *consistency between markers*. This was typified by comments such as: ‘contradictory markers’ and ‘not consistent – you just can’t win’. Students given contradictory advice by different markers could see this as hindering the usefulness of feedback. However, it is also possible that a lack of understanding of the feedback discourse means that students are mistaking feedback which is presented differently as being different. It may be that although the feedback appears to be different when taken at face value the same advice is being given just in a different way.

## Discussion

Both staff and students agree that feedback is critical to improving performance in HE. Dissatisfaction with feedback is therefore a cause for concern. This study aimed to explore the reasons for poor satisfaction with feedback by looking at the differences in students’ expectations and experiences of feedback during their first year of study. By examining the quantitative and qualitative data collected by this study we consider how we can improve student’s experiences of feedback within realistic limits in order to improve student feedback satisfaction.

The results of the mock essay element of this study suggest that extensive feedback is both read and valued by students regardless of the grade awarded. This contradicts previous literature that suggested that grades are ‘all-important’ (Stothart 2008; Wojtas 1998) and this suggests, in contrast to the views held by Butler (1987), that students are still keen to look beyond simply comparing grades with their peers. The findings that students are interested in more than just the grade awarded to their coursework is good news as it suggests that lecturers can play a useful role in the student learning process and that feedback can be modified in order to improve student satisfaction.

Past studies aimed at increasing feedback satisfaction have focused on the procedural elements of feedback (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2001; Rae and Cochrane 2008). In the current study, we asked students about their experiences regarding the legibility of their feedback. Unexpectedly we found that a substantial number (30%) still reported that feedback was occasionally illegible, a finding which was supported by comments given in the open-ended question. Although staff generally feel handwritten feedback is more personal, illegible feedback cannot be useful. Further, staff should be aware that increasing reliance on technology amongst students means that they are less experienced at deciphering handwriting. One simple method of improving student satisfaction with feedback is to increase the legibility of comments given. More time effective methods of providing typed feedback, such as voice recognition software or the use of a database of pre-written comments to generate personal reports for students, should be considered.

Another procedural issue which needs to be addressed is how to improve the timeliness of feedback. Past studies show quicker feedback leads to a stronger effect on learning (Narasimhan 2001). Returning coursework within a few days

of submission would be the ideal. However, high student numbers and reductions in staff–student ratios mean that it is just not feasible (Hounsell et al. 2006). The study does highlight that students may not only want feedback to feed-forward to future coursework but that feedback can be used as a form of reassurance. Positive feedback can offer emotional reassurance that students (especially in their first year of study) have made the right choice to come to university. This finding suggests one method to improve student satisfaction with the timeliness of feedback would be to provide other forms of emotional support for students. Future research could assess whether meetings with personal tutors and the possible use of early peer support networks can help students to gain confidence in a university environment and thus reduce their dependence on coursework feedback for emotional reassurance.

The current study further considered the emotional impact of feedback by asking students about the impact of receiving feedback. Most students invest a considerable amount of time and effort in their coursework and so it was not surprising that a number of students reporting being ‘upset’ when receiving work back. This finding suggests that it is important to consider the impact of the feedback on students, as students who are upset by comments have previously been found to gain less from the comments made (Kernis, Brocker, and Frankel 1989; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006; Young 2000) and negative comments could lead to a reduction in motivation (Hounsell et al. 2006). As negative comments can be demoralising (Poulos and Mahony 2008) markers should be careful to phrase feedback in a positive manner. Further, Lizzio and Wilson (2008) suggest that one method of improving students’ experiences of feedback would, therefore, be to include encouraging comments as this can enhance the acceptance of negative feedback and maintain confidence and engagement. In addition, markers should aim to give balanced feedback with both positive and negative feedback comments in combination as this has been found to be more beneficial than when just negative comments are used (Lizzio and Wilson 2008). Our study highlights the emotional impact the feedback can have on students and further research could be undertaken to consider how differing ratios of positive and negative comments can impact differently on student motivation and emotional responses.

Students in our study stated that they would like to know more about the problems of the whole cohort. Sharing common problems on a piece of coursework may be a way of helping students feel less alone in their problems and so lessen the emotional impact of any negative feedback received. In conclusion, student’s emotional responses to feedback may have a negative impact on their studies and so lead to dissatisfaction with the feedback given. Consequently, if markers make reasonable attempts to lessen the emotional impact (feedback by providing encouragement, positive comments and sharing comment coursework problems) satisfaction with feedback may well improve.

In addition to emotional aspects of receiving feedback, we suggested that past experiences could also affect how satisfied students were with their feedback. Extensive feedback earlier in a student’s academic career may lead to an over-reliance on tutors to provide detailed feedback. As a result, when such students experience the more self-directed learning approach typical of university learning, they may misunderstand the reduction in the feedback given as being poor quality feedback. The results of our study, however, do not support this proposition. Although past experiences did impact on students’ feedback

satisfaction, we found students who reported more dissatisfaction with feedback at university, were more likely to have reported poorer feedback (quality and amount) prior to university. This finding therefore suggests that students dissatisfied with feedback earlier in their academic career are likely to remain dissatisfied during the first year of university study. One possible reason that students report dissatisfaction with feedback both prior to university and at the end of their first year of study, is that they do not have the skills needed to decode and use the feedback supplied. If students are lacking the key skills needed to decode feedback then future research is essential to discover the best ways to develop these skills in undergraduate students.

The limited number of independent learning activities undertaken in response to feedback comments is further evidence that students do not know how to use the feedback. If students do not have the skills needed to interpret and use the comments given (Burke 2009; Cook, Rushton, and Macintosh 2006; Richardson 2005) then it is not surprising that they see the feedback as being of limited use and so cited their dissatisfaction. Previous research (Weaver 2006) suggests that students need more encouragement to take control of their own learning and become autonomous learners (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). The need to explain how to use feedback may be greater today as a significant proportion of students may not have the same levels of expertise in academic skills previously expected in HE. Students with poorer academic skills in using feedback are more likely to show an over-dependence on their tutor (Zimmerman 1989) and expect more explicit feedback comments. Therefore, teaching the study skills needed to interpret and use feedback early in a student's university career may reduce over-reliance on tutors' feedback comments and stop students feeling dissatisfaction with the amount of feedback provided.

As well as teaching the study skills needed to use feedback effectively, students can be encouraged to undertake more self-directed learning during meetings with the tutor who marked the work. However, in common with Price et al. (2010) we found that the majority of students did not attend one to one meetings with their tutors. What was interesting was that in the questionnaire some of our students reported that they would like to have additional verbal feedback on their assignments. One way of addressing the request for verbal feedback without the need of a face to face meeting would be the wider use of new technologies, such as podcasts (e.g. France and Wheeler 2007) or even videocasts. Evaluation of new methods of giving feedback which allow students to receive help on how to use their feedback without experiencing the emotional or logistical problems associated with organising a face to face meeting with their tutors is needed. In addition, new technologies such as video and podcasts allow staff to give fuller comments, in a shorter time, without raising problems of legibility (Merry and Orsmond 2008) and so should be a good method of increasing student satisfaction with feedback in a time effective manner.

One further problem with feedback highlighted by 25 students in their open-ended questionnaire response was inconsistencies in the feedback given by different members of staff. For large cohorts it is impossible to have a single member of staff marking all of a cohort's work, so it is likely students will have a wide range of different feedback experiences in a short space of time. Whilst there are clear assessment criteria against which to judge a piece of work (and moderation procedures are designed to ensure these criteria are used consistently) it is the case that

different markers may comment on different aspects of a student's work. To an inexperienced student, it may appear that markers are awarding marks for different pieces of information, when in fact the differing comments may not have a real bearing on the mark awarded. In order to stop students worrying about perceived marking inconsistencies students undertaking courses which attract a large cohort should be forewarned that a large number of staff will be assessing their work. Further, it should be explained to students that while at a superficial level comments from different markers may seem dissimilar the key criteria that the coursework is judged on will remain the same. In addition, the benefits of a varying team of markers can also be highlighted to the student (for example, being exposed to variety of perspectives, different markers can pick up different problems as student progress through their first year).

When considering the results of the current study it is important to note that the students undertaking the mock essay task had not written the essay themselves and so may not have had the same emotional reaction when viewing the feedback. Although students did not personally write the essay, students in the study did view the material carefully showing more satisfaction with the assigned grade when it was 62% than 48% and showing greater satisfaction when more extensive feedback was given. Artificial manipulation of the grade and feedback on a mock essay, although not as ecologically valid as observing students' reactions to their own work, was more ethical. Deceiving students about their grades in order to assess their reactions to feedback would not have been acceptable.

A further point to bear in mind is that students participated in this study at a point when they had completed the vast majority of their first year at university and had, therefore, *survived* an academic year of feedback comments. As the results of this study suggest that feedback has an important role in providing emotional support to students, it would be interesting to examine the impact of feedback on students who had left the course earlier in the year. Future work should also consider whether the feedback expectations of first years are similar to those of students in different years. It may well be that the emotional reactions to feedback and problems with using feedback are specific to students in their first year of study. Feedback expectations may well be different for other year groups.

In conclusion, the simple answer to the question posed in the title of this article is no, feedback in the case completed here is not meeting the expectations of first year students. However, this does not mean feedback practices should be changed immediately. Providing students with very extensive feedback is neither possible nor desirable. Although lecturers should provide adequate, timely and legible feedback, as well as considering the emotional impact feedback can have, it is also important that students know how to use feedback. Few students in our study acted on the feedback given. So although students read and value feedback there would seem to be a misunderstanding between staff and students as to what feedback is for. If staff are viewing feedback as a starting point from which students can improve but students are seeing feedback as offering all the answers to improving their performance then student satisfaction with feedback is likely to be low. We speculate that feedback satisfaction could be greatly improved if universities manage students' feedback expectations, with more guidance given to students on what feedback is for and how feedback can be used in conjunction with other resources to improve performance.



### Notes on contributors

Sarita Robinson is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Central Lancashire. Her main research focus is exploring the psychobiological and cognitive changes in people in high stress environments and she is a committee member for the BPS Psychobiology Section. In addition, Sarita has a keen interest in pedagogic issues related to learning and has taught short memory courses for both teachers and students.

Debbie Pope is a senior lecturer in psychology. Her current research interests include emotional intelligence and the effects of inattention on learning in both children and adults. She is a committee member of the BPS Education Section and editor of *Psychology of Education Review*.

Lynda Holyoak is a principal lecturer in psychology, with a particular responsibility for student experience. She is currently conducting research into the experiences of students with ADHD within HE.

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