

## **1 Executive summary**

### **1.1 Background and context**

Assessment and feedback are crucial to the student learning experience and are key areas for enhancement, as highlighted by both the National Student Survey and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Understanding student perceptions of assessment and feedback are essential in attempting successfully to tackle the key issues. In the first year of Bioscience degree programmes, students attend practical classes and complete practical reports as assessments. With increasing numbers of students enrolling on these courses, providing effective pieces of assessment, and giving student feedback which they value, is becoming increasingly difficult.

This study focused on the transition from school to university and developing an understanding of students' perceptions of assessment and feedback at university. Year 12 and 13 schoolchildren (lower and upper sixth form) from 70 schools across Great Britain were questioned about how their school work was assessed and the type of feedback they were given. They were also questioned about how they thought this might change once they reached university. This information was fed into an intervention presentation that was given to first-year undergraduates at four universities. This highlighted the differences between assessment and feedback at school and at university. A comparison of the perceptions of undergraduate and staff attitudes to feedback was made. This led to a series of recommendations being made to enhance the assessment and feedback process.

When students arrive at university they do so with expectations of how their coursework will be handled. This may be at variance with what actually happens. As the student population has increased in both diversity and numbers, teaching strategies to support student learning have become increasingly important. Both the National Student Survey and QAA have raised the issue of assessment higher up the academic agenda. Students are now paying fees and as such their expectations of what to expect from a higher education experience have increased. The emphasis has become one of looking for the best experience for the student, and this is particularly so when setting and providing feedback on coursework. Recent and relevant feedback is really valuable to students, and understanding students' perceptions of what constitutes good feedback is very important. This relates to issues such as student success, retention, happiness and whether they embark on a personal programme of deep or shallow learning.

Feedback on coursework is an aid to student learning. It can vary from a tick and a mark at the end of the work, to extensive written feedback. University staff have their own ideas as to what constitutes good feedback and what students do with the feedback they provide. In addition, many staff are not trained in setting assignments and giving feedback. Generally feedback tends to be personal to the students and written on their assignment. Feedback can also be verbal and/or given as group feedback. What is clear is that feedback at university may be very different from feedback that pupils receive in school, and students arriving at university may not be prepared for the different style of feedback at university nor how to handle and utilise the feedback they are given.

As student numbers have grown and the staff to student ratio has fallen, one of the biggest challenges for higher education is working out how to provide good quality teaching to large numbers of students. This is particularly relevant to setting coursework and providing feedback in large first-year undergraduate practical classes. Providing good quality feedback and understanding staff perceptions of what is valuable to the students, student perceptions of how their work will be assessed and how these perceptions relate to the reality of the situation form the basis of this study. Understanding perceptions is crucial in finding solutions.

This study focuses on the school to university transition for students studying Bioscience degrees. The outcomes, however, could be applied to other disciplines. Clearly there are many other routes into higher education such as for mature or international students, which have their own issues with regard to perceptions of feedback to coursework, but they are beyond the scope of this study.

The study was designed around seven key aims, which were to:

1. improve the transition process as it relates to feedback on assignments;
2. conduct baseline research on the way that coursework is handled at sixth-form level in a variety of schools across Great Britain;
3. conduct research into the perceptions that schoolchildren have of the way that coursework is handled in higher education;
4. create an intervention presentation that can be given to undergraduate students during their induction period that will highlight the differences between the ways that coursework is handled at school and in university;
5. assess the effect of the intervention presentation on the students' perceptions of their feedback on laboratory assignments during their first year;
6. improve the perception of feedback given to undergraduate students by understanding their expectation of how coursework is handled, based on their school experience;
7. conduct research on how staff perceive the value that students place on different types of feedback.

## **1.2 Methods**

Methods used were small group interviews, questionnaires and an intervention in the form of a presentation. Small group interviews of schoolchildren at two schools helped design a questionnaire that was circulated to 31 schools. Results from these questionnaires were fed into a presentation to be given to first-year undergraduates at four universities as they started their degree programmes. The undergraduates were all studying Bioscience degrees.

Results from the questionnaires to schoolchildren were used to gain insight into how assessment and feedback were handled at school, and also to look at the perceptions

schoolchildren had of how assessment and feedback would be handled at university.

Questionnaires were given to first- and second-year Bioscience students at the four participating universities. The questionnaire asked about their experiences of assessment and feedback during their first year. The first-year students had had the intervention presentation, whereas the second-year students had not and acted as a control group. Staff at the four universities were given a questionnaire that was designed to gauge their opinions on how students reacted to assessment and the feedback they were given. Small group interviews were held with undergraduates at one of the universities. While they were small and only two were held, interviews provided some useful insight into some responses to the questionnaires.

### **1.3 Findings**

This report focuses on an area of study that is receiving a lot of attention at present and is moving higher up the agenda of universities in general. The literature review provided the context in which to analyse the findings.

There were key findings in relation to the misconceptions staff had over students' approach to feedback they received. Students ranked the use of a coursework feedback form much higher than staff, and considerably higher than staff thought students would rank it. Staff ranked the mark as more important than the students ranked it: almost 90% of staff believed students considered the mark to be the most important form of feedback, whereas actually only 34.5% of undergraduates considered the mark most important. Half the staff believed that only a few students took any notice of the feedback, and more than 10% of staff believed most students took no notice of their feedback. This study suggests that the proportion of students that do benefit from the feedback is much higher than this, with approximately half of the students saying they always read feedback comments. It appears that there is a rather cynical view from the staff about the student learning process and their use of feedback that is not really justified. Recommendations will be made to address this mismatch of perceptions.

First-year undergraduates at four universities (between 100 and 300 students at each university) were given a presentation within the first two weeks at university about the potential differences they may experience between school and university in the way coursework and feedback may be handled. Following this intervention, the key difference, highlighted by the questionnaires, between first- and second-year students was that the first year students appeared to be more realistic than second-years in their expectations of feedback. When surveyed at the end of their first year, many students indicated that they had not been given the information from the presentation, suggesting they did not remember being given the presentation. However, the message appeared to have altered both their expectations and their level of satisfaction, as demonstrated by the following findings:

- second-years expected more verbal feedback to their coursework than first-years;
- the number of very unhappy responses was lower for first-years relative to the responses for second-years;

□ first-year students were happier in relation to the feedback they received on their coursework than second-year students. The possible reasons for this will be discussed fully in the main body of the report.

Results from the survey of sixth-form students suggested that they did have certain misconceptions about assessment and feedback practice at university that need addressing as they enter university. For example, the majority of school pupils expected to have some personal verbal feedback, which may not always be the case. This misconception was also apparent when asking pupils about their expectations of drafts being commented on. School pupils felt that verbal feedback from the person marking the work was of high importance.

Over 50% of pupils said they got verbal feedback at school either 'always' or 'often'. This can go some way to explaining their expectations of this type of feedback continuing when they get to university.

Students had a clear expectation as to how coursework would be handled at university that, in some key respects, did not always match the reality of the situation. There were many misconceptions about the way coursework would be marked; for example, approximately 50% of secondary school pupils expected coursework to be sent away to be marked, while almost 30% believed it to happen 'always' or 'often'. Students expected to be able to feed forward feedback from one assignment to the next, and school pupils expected to have a draft commented on at university before the final version of an assignment was handed in. In many cases this is not what happens, especially with very large groups of students. If students are not told about this difference in the way their coursework is handled they are very likely to be dissatisfied with the feedback process.

There were differences between the responses of students in the four institutions taking part in the survey with one university showing that a high percentage of undergraduates felt their coursework improved as a direct result of the feedback they were given. However, at a second university the percentage of undergraduates who felt their coursework did not improve as a result of the feedback they received was low enough to require urgent action by the department concerned. At all four universities students did not see asking for extra help as part of the normal feedback process, and there was a general reluctance to ask for extra help. There was no general trend in the data that suggested a gender effect. The feedback process and the reaction of students to the feedback they were given are complex and emotional issues, and are interlinked with many other issues that students have to face at university. Unravelling the variation between universities and between two cohorts of students at each university must be treated with caution and with an understanding that there are many interrelating issues that are crucial in making sense of the findings in this study.

#### **1.4 Recommendations**

Universities, at the School/department level, should think through and explore the implications of the mismatch in expectations between staff and students. Having a focus on inducting students in the assessment process during the early weeks of university life may go some way to helping the students gain more from their feedback experiences.

1. Time should be built in to modules/units to allow for verbal feedback on assignments.

2. A presentation should be delivered during students' induction period that outlines how students can expect coursework to be handled at university and crucially how this differs from their school experiences, with caveats regarding students coming from other backgrounds. There should be regular reinforcement of key issues raised in the presentation throughout the first year.
3. A presentation to staff should be designed that highlights how the students use and value the feedback they are given.
4. Students need to have more information about what a mark actually means and be fully informed about marking criteria.
5. All universities should consider designing a coursework feedback form that grades students' work against a set of criteria and allows for a summary of feedback that also feeds forward to enable the student to learn from the comments.
6. Staff should be trained in how to use peer assessment effectively.
7. Assessment and feedback should be a priority on the agenda of university teaching committees.