

## Feedback forms project

### Background

The project was undertaken to gather students' views on feedback forms and identify what students find useful about the forms. The project was interested in identifying areas of good practice by staff and making suggestions for effective feedback form design based on the students' feedback.

The project was run by a student intern and supported by staff in the Learning and Teaching Development Service (LTDS). A total of 66 blank feedback forms were collected from 19 different schools and across a number of levels of study. From these a smaller selection were chosen which displayed a wide range of different formats and features, these were anonymised when presented to students. Two focus groups and individual interviews were held with students drawn from across the university to gather students' views on receiving feedback, the effectiveness of the selected feedback sheet designs and suggestions for development.

### Key findings

Students noted that handwritten feedback can be difficult to decipher and they appreciated typed feedback.

Forms with large comments boxes were positively rated by students. They responded well to sheets which provided space for detailed and personalised feedback with which they could engage.

A number of the feedback sheets had bullet points (left blank for staff to add comments) pre-printed on the form. Students did not find sheet with prescribed bullet points helpful as it was felt this leads to shorter feedback and restricts what a marker can write.

Students expressed frustration at the different levels of feedback they receive, comments of this nature focussed on the varied amount and quality between markers regarding both the feedback sheets and marginalia. These frustrations are epitomised in one student's comments about annotations:

*"One person's feedback form may have several sentences, picking out good points and areas for improvement, alongside detailed annotations on the assessment itself. On the other hand, other markers may only write several words, with little annotation or direct feedback on the assessment."*

A significant number of feedback sheets incorporate tick boxes which can be seen as a direct link between the marking criteria and the feedback sheet. The majority of students, however, found tick boxes to be unhelpful for subjective elements of the marking criteria (for example boxes relating to the argument, rather than objective element such as grammar). They reported that these did not help with their understanding of the mark given, were difficult to engage with and did not provide guidance on how to improve.

Students found it useful when the when written feedback given was closely linked to the assessment criteria, reflecting the criteria's themes and the language used. This was less effectively done when the criteria were distilled into a decontextualized tick in a box or single word descriptors such as 'excellent'. One student explained that: "the tick boxes don't seem that necessary if they're drawn

upon in the comments.” This was mirrored in many comments made by other students in the focus groups.

Sheets which clearly demark the feedback into sections were well received, for example, comments on that specific piece of work and points for improving future work. One student said that: “It also enables you to better understand what the marker is trying to say, when their feedback is split into sections.” These clear sections also helped students to identify the ‘feed forward’ elements of the marker’s comments

Student reported that they found it hard to understand terms such as ‘sophisticated argument’ or similar examples of academic shorthand, often used on marking criteria, without contextualisation and exemplars.

## Recommendations

Look at the feedback sheets you have been using with and consider whether these should be redesigned. Consult with the students in your school as part of the process.

Typing feedback, wherever possible, so that students are able to easily read the comments.

Tick boxes should only be used for objective areas of the marking criteria.

The majority of space on the form should be given to written feedback.

This space for written feedback should have clear delineated sections which address the current piece of work (the strengths and areas for improvements) and a separate section which gives clear advice for future work.

Colleagues should be encouraged to discuss how they utilise the marking sheets within their school or section, or within smaller module groups, to develop some consistency in approach in regards to the volume of feedback and use, or not, of marginalia.

Schools may consider developing a resource for staff which includes providing a blank form and a marked-up form to demonstrate to new markers what is expected.

A significant number of schools differentiate between stages of study, with different feedback sheets for each year across the programme. This means students need to familiarise themselves with the next style of feedback sheet each year. Where this is the case it might be useful to consider the sheets together to see whether some elements could usefully be consistent across the different stages.

At the beginning of the degree programme, and subsequently if the marking criteria and feedback sheets change across the programme, there should be structured opportunities for students to gain an understanding of the expectations of the marking criteria and the ways in which this is reflected in the relevant feedback sheet.

A dialogue with students may be helpful for them to understand that not every person will mark the same way but that this is a positive, rather than a negative trait. Students were open to differences in the style of marking, their concerns related to a consistency of quality and usefulness of the feedback. Included in this dialogue could also be common annotations that markers use which will help students understand the marginalia.