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Examination Feedback

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Title of project: Examination Feedback

Type of project: Literature review.

Keywords: Examination, formative, summative, feedback, toolkit

Aims of project:

This project focussed on exploring types of examination feedback. The project brought together key stakeholders from UPSU, students, academic and educational development staff. The aim was to consider perceptions, experiences, expectations and practical considerations of different feedback models to inform the development of an institutional wide examination feedback toolkit. Staff in two academic disciplines, Law and Sociology piloted different formats of examination feedback.

Background/context to project:

There has been considerable focus within the HE sector on both formative and summative feedback mechanisms, with feedback and feedforward cycles highlighted as examples of good practice to enhance student learning, motivate and enhance. Assessment feedback is a valuable part of the student learning cycle and the quality of feedback within a module can motivate and enhance a student's performance and future employability (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Written, oral and practical examinations assessing specific learning outcomes can occur mid-cycle and/or at the end of a module or period of study. Traditionally (particularly for end-of-module time limited and unseen examinations) a sole final grade, with no or little feedback, is returned to the student. Indeed, much focus has been placed on feedback for coursework based assessment and 'seldom on ...exams which may also have a significant effect on ...overall marks or grade' (Hounsell et al., 2007b). For example, whilst Plymouth University, like many institutions permits a student to make an appointment with a tutor to talk through an exam script, this is not widely promoted and staff report little take-up by students of this opportunity.

In addition, with concerns that marks for exams are generally lower than those for coursework and the implications this may have in determining degree classification, the need for exam feedback becomes critically important (Bridges et al., 2002, Simonite, 2003).

The general lack of feedback to examinations has prompted student concerns (NUS, 2009) – it creates uncertainty and limited opportunities to improve and learn, particularly for any future examination based assessment. As Scoles et al (2012) argue: '...while exams have long been regarded as different from other forms of assessment it is not justifiable to exempt them from the good practice that can, and does, inform other types of assessment and other areas of teaching and learning. This need is reinforced by the continuing use of exams as a significant part of course assessment strategies in many subject areas.'

Recognising that examination feedback has the potential to make an important contribution to enhancing both the learning experience and student performance (Muldoon, 2012), many institutions have amended their assessment policies to specifically extend the expectation of feedback to examinations.

Analysis of practice across HEIs and the literature identify a variety of models capable of offering effective and meaningful exam feedback. These recognise a need to offer formative assessment opportunities with feedback as well as summative (Springer Sargent, C., and Curcio, A., 2012). Some examples of feedback mechanisms can be found in the toolkit, see link below.

Methods used:

Interviews with staff and students focussing on previous experiences and satisfaction in developing examination feedback. Review of the existing pedagogic literature on examination feedback. Both the literature review and interview data were utilised to inform the development of a toolkit and standardised student survey collating experiences of pre-examination preparation and post examination feedback.

Results:

Interviews with staff and students, alongside the literature review, informed the development of an examinations feedback toolkit, designed to support and facilitative changes to current examination feedback practices. The aim of the toolkit is to:

- Explore the significance and purpose of offering feedback to examinations;
- Identify various models of examination feedback;
- Assess key factors that may influence the choice of examination feedback model;
- Develop a programme strategy for examination feedback; and
- In light of the programme strategy, develop models of examination feedback at the modular level

Students across the three participating modules experienced more than one type of formative pre-examination support and feedback activities offered by academic staff. These included exemplar exam questions, opportunities for model exam questions with Q&A session, mock examination, individual and group feedback and general examination technique training. Students undertook a full range of individual study activities. Besides the obviously revising of the subject material students accessed learning development materials, undertook their own mock/practice exams and used online resources.

Top level findings:

The models of examination feedback identified by the students used in the pilot models were

- Individual (1:1) verbal feedback from a tutor on your exam paper
- Generic verbal feedback to a class or group
- Allowed sight of Individual feedback on an exam script (e.g. in a 1:1 session) or written feedback sheet
- Written feedback via use of Moodle DLE

'I think that exam preparation, guidance and feedback has progressed and improved'

High levels of student satisfaction were expressed across all pilot modules, 75% and 93%.

Students agreed that pre-exam preparation tasks allowed them to understand how the exam was assessing their learning in relation to the module learning outcomes, 96%-100%.

Students agreed that they had been able to identify how to improve their examination and study techniques for the next exam, 72% - 100%.

Students agreed that the examination approach taken in the module has improved their confidence in undertaking exams, 72% - 93.3%.

Students agreed that they understood how the feedback comments (written or verbal) related to the exam mark awarded, 76.7% - 80.6%.

One interesting outcome of the survey is evidence suggesting that previous course examination techniques used by students remain a significant influence on their current practice and approach. **Students agreed that they used the same exam preparation techniques as for their previous course (e.g. A Levels, Year 1/2/3 of undergraduate degree), 73.3% - 79.1%.** This potentially presents challenges where past techniques have resulted in failure and/or to maximisation of exam performance. PDP and personal tutoring systems may wish to address/explore this as part of a whole programme approach to embedding examination feedback and encouraging students' reflective practice on their learning.

The emerging theme when students were asked for preferences on the type of examination feedback they would like was the availability of more than one mode of feedback. Combinations of written and verbal feedback were typical, some preferences were for 1:1 or group feedback, with additional feedback made available for those who request it.

The Sociology module lead reported a substantial improvement in pre-resit examination performance, with **average examination grade** increasing to **65.79%** from 63.3%, in 2014/15, and 53.4% in 2013/14. The 'performance gap' between the exam and coursework also narrowed from 14% in 2014/15 to 0.5% in 2015/16. Qualitative feedback from students suggests that they felt more confident, had allocated more of their own study time to examination preparation, and had a greater awareness of criteria for success.

One module lead for a Law Semester 2, Level 5 module reported improvement in pre resit examination performance which was felt to be primarily the result of formative feed-in mechanisms and the adoption of a programme level 'exam feedback day' where students could seek individual feedback on semester 1 exams. Analysis of performance data revealed the number of students **securing a Good Honours result** increased in 2015/16 to **58.92%** (from 55.88%) and those achieving **>70%** increased from 14.7% to **21.4%**, with the majority of these students receiving individual feedback through formative assessment during the semester.

Associated publications (include details of intended/draft publications):

It was intended to submit an article for peer review publication. The literature review does reveal the limitation of examination feedback pedagogic research, however it is also apparent from a review of online HEI policies that Plymouth University is *lagging behind* other institutions in terms of a standard policy where examinations, like other forms of assessment should include a mark and feedback comments as a minimum. From this observation the recommendation to the T&L Committee for a change the wording in the Assessment Policy was made, see below.

Dissemination (conferences/ workshops/consultation, Plymouth University conferences and events, etc.):

Examination Feedback Toolkit disseminated across the institution via T&L handbook, see <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/your-university/teaching-and-learning/guidance-and-resources/assessment> and forming part of a TLS workshop <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/whats-on/exam-feedback>

Recommendation to amend the PU Assessment Policy to remove the ambiguity between examinations and other forms of assessment, see attached document for further details.

PEDRIO Teaching and Learning Conference 2016. Workshop. *Improving student engagement and learning through examination feedback.*

Pre and post student survey questions can on request be made available to programme teams wishing to evaluate local implementation of examination feedback. Please email: c.sutton@plymouth.ac.uk