

CADQ Guide

Feedback turnaround time

Reflecting the nature of recent changes in feedback policy at Nottingham Trent University, this resource will focus on one aspect of feedback, that is, the importance of timeliness in the provision of student feedback. It will seek to answer questions about the role that turnaround time plays in the overall effectiveness of feedback and will consider how a focus on turnaround time may impact on quality of feedback. The main sections are:

- [The importance of timeliness](#)
- [Turnaround time and quality: an optimal balance?](#)
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- [Policy at Nottingham Trent University](#)
- [Designing assessment and feedback to manage turnaround time](#)
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The importance of timeliness

Influential writers on higher education have highlighted the role that timeliness plays. For example, Chickering and Gamson (1987) include prompt feedback as one of their 'seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education' stating that, 'assessment without timely feedback contributes little to learning' (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, p. 3). Graham Gibbs, who has published extensively on assessment and feedback, is often quoted: 'feedback should be timely in that it is received by students while it still matters to them and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance' (Gibbs, 2010a, p. 3). Other writers who have concluded that the usefulness of feedback is dependent on timeliness as well as effective feedback practices include Bryan and Clegg (2006), Race (2007) and Ramsden (2003). Arguably then, the further away from the time the work was produced; the less effective feedback will be with regard to its formative benefits.

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Key points

Timeliness in feedback turnaround supports meaningful learning and is important for the following reasons:

- timeliness together with detail and quality of feedback all contribute towards the effectiveness of feedback
- feedback should be timely enough for students to comprehend its messages within the context of the submitted work
- feedback should be timely enough for students to incorporate learning points into future study and assessments
- student satisfaction with feedback is low nationally and within NTU compared to other aspects of the student experience. Promptness is an important part of this.

You might also be interested in

Engaging students in the use of feedback

Peer feedback

Intrinsic feedback

Feedback as a dialogic process

Feedback chapter of the CADQ Case Study resource

Kulik and Kulik (1988, p. 94) concluded from a meta-analysis of 53 studies in 1988 that, 'delayed feedback appears to help learning only in special experimental situations [...] more typically to delay feedback is to hinder learning'. The length of turnaround time however may not be an issue of equal significance for all students; promptness may be more relevant to first years and less relevant to students as they become more confident and autonomous.

Despite the importance of assessment for learning, changes in the UK HE sector have meant that feedback practices are under pressure. Recently, higher education has been characterised by increasing student numbers with a concomitant pressure on cohort sizes and staff to student ratios. The student body is also more diverse. Modularisation has, in many cases, led to modules running over a shorter period of time resulting in fewer opportunities for formative feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). It is in this climate that consideration of what constitutes quality in feedback on assessment is crucial, particularly as it relates to effectiveness for student learning.

Turnaround time and quality: an optimal balance?

The balance between timeliness and quality is not an absolute. Rather, it depends on the nature of each assessment task and on whether feedback associated with those tasks is intended to help students develop their current piece of work or to inform them of a judgement and offer ideas for future consideration. If the aim of feedback is to '... empower students to become self-regulated learners, able to make their own appraisals of the work they produce ...' (Nicol 2010) then the 'quality' of feedback will be determined by the extent to which feedback achieves its aim.

In the minds of many markers 'quality' feedback is likely to be equated with detailed, written comments (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004); for students 'quality' feedback may be synonymous with one-to-one or tutorial-type discussion. However, the 'quality' of any given feedback is not wholly determined by the content of the message being communicated by a marker; instead it is realised through the engagement of students with those messages and hence the translation of those messages into improved student learning. Quality of feedback is not wholly dependent on promptness just as it is not wholly dependent on the content of the messages communicated within feedback. Promptness can however, act as an important mechanism for assessment to inform learning in the most meaningful way. Gibbs and Simpson (2004, p. 19) highlight this in their contrast between the possible effectiveness of perfect but slow feedback versus imperfect but faster feedback:

If students do not receive feedback fast enough then they will have moved on to new content and the feedback is irrelevant to their ongoing studies [...] There may be a trade off between the rapidity and quality of feedback so that, for example, imperfect feedback from a fellow student provided almost immediately may have much more impact than more perfect feedback from a tutor four weeks later.

It is therefore not necessarily the case that an emphasis on timeliness necessitates a compromise on quality. On the contrary, promptness of feedback should be considered an integral aspect of effective feedback. Gibbs argues that the volume, quality and timeliness of feedback are all good predictors of educational outcomes (Gibbs 2010b, p. 15) with the underlying assumption being that attention should be paid to all three aspects of feedback.

Feedback and student satisfaction

Feedback is no longer simply a pedagogic concern, it impacts on students' satisfaction with their course and institution as a whole and as such it is an issue of major concern to most UK universities. In the 2012 National Student Survey, only 62% of Nottingham Trent students stated that feedback on their work had been prompt (up 9% from 2011) while only 61% felt that the feedback they had received helped them to clarify things they did not understand (up 5% from 2011). Of course, there is a consideration in the way the sector has tended to read NSS data. Focus is on the percentage of respondents who were in agreement with a particular statement with an implication that the other respondents were in disagreement. However, another large grouping for NTU is the neutral response and students choosing this option may have been indicating that they were uncertain, ambivalent, or had had a range of experiences. This should not diminish our valuing of the data, but may influence our interpretation of it. The National Union of Students is concerned about the NSS results on assessment feedback and, in 2010, produced a [Charter on Feedback and Assessment](#). This included an expectation that, 'students should usually receive personalised feedback within three weeks of the assessment submission deadline. There could also be generalised group feedback on the key learning areas that affect most students within one week of the assessment'.

Policy at Nottingham Trent University

The Nottingham Trent University (NTU) policy on feedback to students on assessments states that 'feedback should be timely enough to feed into the next piece of work, as appropriate to context' (Academic Standards and Quality Handbook, Section 15H). This policy requires that students receive individual feedback, including an individual grade, on all assessed work, within three weeks of the submission date.

The potential for making changes to turnaround time is necessarily constrained or enabled by contextual factors, including the types of assessment used, feedback practices, student numbers etc. In particular, large cohort sizes and lengthy assessments contribute to the difficulties of turning work round quickly. Two main approaches to managing turnaround time are; control strategies which make the process faster and independence strategies which focus on improving student engagement with feedback (Land, 2005).

Designing assessment and feedback to manage turnaround time

Management of turnaround time in the longer term may require structural changes to assessment regimes both at module and course level. This includes considering the number and range of assessments and whether they are a valuable use of staff and student time in terms of the knowledge and competencies gained by the students. Lecturers' frustrations over the time and effort spent marking can be compounded by students not reading feedback comments so any structural changes will be most effective when combined with a consideration of how students engage with feedback.

The School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment (ADBE) conducted a school-wide review of assessment and feedback practices with a view to encouraging a culture of targeted, meaningful feedback. The review focussed in particular on: the appropriateness of the assessment criteria and grade descriptors, the number of credits awarded, student use

of feedback, resource management and workload planning. Feedback from students via staff-student liaison has been positive. For more information contact [Michelle Pepin](#).

Some assessment and feedback design strategies which may help to manage turnaround time include:

Reducing the number of summative assessments whilst increasing the number of formative assessments. This can spread staff and student workloads more evenly allowing more time for discussion, reflection and feedback on the remaining assessments.

Reducing the number of words in assessments necessarily reduces the time it takes lecturers to mark. It may be worth considering whether the word limits for various assessments are appropriate.

Limiting the range of assessment types within a course could contribute towards shorter turnaround times by familiarising both staff and students with the assessment types in use and thus reducing the need for detailed summative feedback particularly when combined with increased use of formative feedback. In terms of pedagogical benefits limiting the range of assessment types can reduce student confusion particularly and can have a positive effect on student learning when combined with an increased use of formative feedback and a reduced range of learning outcomes and criteria. Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet report that 'it is traditional assessment methods, that emphasised learning about goals and standards through frequent formative assessment and especially through oral feedback and prompt feedback, and that had little summative assessment of a limited variety of kinds, that were found to be associated with positive student learning responses, and with greater clarity of goals and standards' (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2007, p. 26). An alternative view is that a variety of assessment types is necessary to ensure inclusivity as certain students may excel at different types of assessment and that having a range of assessment types can encourage student interest and motivation (Rust, 2005). The issue of range of assessment types therefore requires discussion ideally at course level with any consideration of limiting the range being weighed against the potential learning benefits of having a wider range of assessment types within the context of a given course.

Using different types of assessments might ensure that assessments are more aligned with the intended learning outcomes and depending on the assessment types used, could save marking and feedback time. When combined with limiting the range of assessment types this could help ease student confusion and thus contribute to deeper student engagement with assessment tasks. It might be for example that some essays or long reports could be appropriately replaced with shorter reviews, articles, posters or summaries (Brown, Race and Smith, 1997). The key question for consideration would be whether each assessment is truly assessing whatever it is intended that the students learn. For more on aligning assessments with intended learning outcomes see Biggs 2003.

Using assessment criteria sheets can enable quick initial feedback on routine assessment matters in lieu of or before more in-depth individual feedback is given. Criteria sheets are forms which contain the assessment criteria with space for ticks, crosses, marks and comments (Brown, Race and Smith, 1997). An example of an essay criteria sheet is available online from the [University of Plymouth](#) (University of Plymouth, 2009, p. 27). More guidance on assessment criteria sheets is available in the CADQ resource on *Marking and moderation of text-based coursework*.

Use of comment banks can enable quick feedback. Comment banks are stores of feedback comments (e.g. saved in a MS Word document or using 'Grade Mark' – not supported at NTU) which are collected over time from students' assessments and are then used to provide future cohorts of students with feedback. This can either be within individual or generic feedback or as the focus of an in-class discussion. Comment banks can be a useful tool for feeding back on common mistakes especially for first years, but should not be relied upon as a sole means of giving feedback as they are unlikely to provide enough specific or personalised detail to motivate students to thoroughly engage (CADQ, 2011).

Provision of anticipative feedback prior to submission. This might include feedback in the form of model answers and discussions of likely misunderstandings / knowledge gaps. The aims of this are to increase the capacity of students to learn through the assessment and reduce the amount of general feedback needed following submission, leaving time to provide individual feedback (Brown, Race and Smith, 1997).

Use of staggered hand-in dates can encourage steadier staff and student workloads. One example of this from the School of Social Work at UCLAN is that students submit a dissertation plan worth 10% of the mark. This ensures that students engage in the dissertation process early on and receive feedback on their work-in-progress (Delli-Colli, n.d., p. 6). A further example is the use of mock exams. A lecturer at Lancashire Law School at UCLAN sets students one mock exam question to do prior to their formal exams which is sat under full exam conditions and is worth 10% of the module mark. This spreads the staff workload and encourages students to prepare effectively and in good time for the formal exams (Delli-Colli, n.d., p. 7).

Clearer forward and sideways linkages of assessment. Ideally this should be considered at course level. Modularisation may mean that one piece of assessment does not necessarily feed into another unless the course has been designed that way. Hence it is difficult for staff to provide feed forward, difficult for students to take forward comments into their next assessments and not motivating for them to do so. Time allocated to discussion of feedback and assessment within the NTU group tutorial system may enable students to learn more effectively through feedback and make connections between the various assessments in different modules. Jackie Hardy from the School of Social Sciences has developed a NOW-based profile which allows staff to see how all students are progressing by a colour-coded entry, along with the feedback for each assignment. It also allows students to see all their marks and feedback across the course.

Practice-related strategies to reduce turnaround time

The type of feedback given should always be determined by the nature of the assessment and the intended learning outcomes. Some types of assessment necessitate quick feedback, e.g. in-class feedback on oral presentations or posters or the provision of cohort feedback on exams. Others such as dissertations necessitate more in-depth feedback possibly in the form of annotated scripts.

Increasing the use of formative feedback given for example on work-in-progress should decrease the amount of summative feedback needed; in this way it could be described as a 'front loading' approach to assessment and feedback and may help to distribute staff workload across semesters as well as improving student learning. Gibbs (2010b) cites the

work of Black and William (1998) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) as indicating that improvements to formative assessment, in particular the provision of more, better and faster feedback has been the educational intervention which has had most impact in schools. Further, Gibbs concluded from a 2007 study, conducted with Dunbar and Goddet, that, 'on degree programmes where the volume of formative assessment is greater, students take a deep approach to their studies to a greater extent' (Gibbs 2010b, p.34). Formative feedback can be used in combination with peer feedback and self reflection. Some of the forms it may take include drop-in sessions for students to discuss work-in-progress, students sharing and discussing assignments in-class or submitting drafts to receive feedback comments (e.g. using the track changes function in MS Word). Feedback given might include generic and/or individual feedback. For more on formative feedback see the CADQ resource on peer feedback, particularly section on *engendering a culture of the critical review* (or crit). Self assessment and peer assessment described below do not necessarily reduce tutor marking time but by front loading in the way described above, such methods can reduce the need for very detailed summative feedback. This will contribute to a reduction in turnaround time:

Use of student self assessment can, when suitably organised, lead to significant enhancements in learning and achievement (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 207). Self assessment might be formative (self evaluation) or summative and might be used before or after submission. For more on self assessment see the CADQ resource on *engaging students in the use of feedback*. James Leinster (Nottingham Business School) has been utilising the self-assessment facility on NOW to help students engage after each face-to-face teaching session. Initial feedback from students on two postgraduate courses is that self-assessment can be effective and is a useful tool. The tool has also been used to support student reading of core texts; again initial findings suggest that the tool is effective. An example of a feedback sheet for students to self-evaluate before receiving tutor comments is available online from the [University of Plymouth](#) (2009, p. 28). A case study on student self-assessment pre and post exams can be found in Delli-Colli (n.d., p. 8).

Use of peer feedback similarly particularly formative feedback, can: enhance disciplinary understanding and critical thinking skills; give students more ownership over their work; encourage active engagement with studies; foster student autonomy; and, increase understanding of learning outcomes particularly less tangible ones (Sadler, 2010). As with the introduction of any new form of assessment there may be initial resource implications. However, the use of peer feedback should, over time, reduce the amount of time tutors themselves need to spend on feedback. For more information on Peer Feedback see the CADQ resource.

Below are some further examples of assessment and feedback practices which could help to reduce feedback turnaround time:

Electronic submission and return of work compared to paper-based submissions saves some administration time. According to an evaluation of NTU School-based pilots of e-submissions and e-marking, the use of electronic systems should save time at two points: around 24-48 hours speeding up collection of scripts from students and distribution of scripts to markers following submission; and, around 24 hours for processing returns (CADQ, 2011). Electronic submission can save time by reducing the number of tasks for which human input is required, e.g., logging of received submissions, receipting, and

distribution of scripts to the marking team. The time savings at the return stage are similar to those at submission. It should however be noted that despite the efficiency gains, additional planning and preparation is needed to manage electronic submissions, particularly for large pieces of work. Such additional work might include for example, setting up submissions, monitoring and checking submissions and extracting submission reports (CADQ, 2011). Information Systems (IS) and CADQ are currently working on a project with the aim of improving current e-assessment systems on NOW. Further information will be available in due course.

Consideration of effective marking practices. The marking practices of individual lecturers vary in approach, for example in how much feedback is considered to be useful. Consideration of a course team's marking practices may help to reduce turnaround time and might also offer opportunities to increase student engagement with and learning through feedback. For further information see CADQ resource on *marking and moderating text-based coursework*.

Time management strategies to allow adequate time for marking and feedback might include the following:

- staggering of assessment deadlines. In some cases this can be precipitated at a course level through assessment and feedback plans.
- Use of student reading weeks to mark

Use of audio feedback. Audio feedback has been cited as saving time compared to written feedback (Delli-Colli, n.d., p. 10) however other research contradicts this finding (CADQ, 2011). Some considerations:

- Recording generic feedback as an audio / audio-visual file and posting a link can provide students with quick feedback whilst staff work on individualised feedback as appropriate/necessary.
- Some staff take an approach of providing only feedback but no mark on audio feedback with the understanding that students listen to the audio feedback before obtaining their mark directly from the tutor.
- Individual or group audio feedback can be provided for draft work to reduce the amount of feedback needed following final submission and marking.
- Audio feedback can also be used on work-in-progress with the advantage that feedback on final work can then concentrate on improving future work.
- Staff and students have reported that comments made in audio feedback can be less ambiguous and therefore more useful than those made in written feedback (CADQ, 2011).
- Students are able to replay the feedback as many times as is necessary for them to fully understand it.
- The same file may be re-used for future cohorts where relevant.
- Integrating audio feedback into written scripts can present challenges (CADQ, 2011).
- Any time saving made will be dependent on different variables such as the level of staff expertise in using the technology and the conditions for recording – whether there is background noise etc.
- Where audio feedback is summative in nature then external examiners may insist on a written summary of the audio feedback given. Students may also request written as well as audio which would therefore increase the time spent.

For more on audio feedback visit the [Sounds Good](#) project website based at Leeds Metropolitan University. Further case studies are outlined below:

- Phil Wane in the School of Social Sciences provides individualised video feedback to students on their assessments.
- Staff in the Lancashire Business School at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) use multi-media to provide students with feedback on presentations; student presentations are videoed then the tutors provide written or audio feedback on the student presentations and any slides the students used. Students are able to see themselves on screen so can evaluate their own performance whilst being able to relate more directly the feedback they receive to their performance (Delli-Colli, n.d., p. 5) 

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