This resource focuses on strategies that academic colleagues can use in order to help students to better understand and engage with feedback. A review of techniques to promote active engagement is presented along with consideration of research into their effectiveness.

Difficulties that students have with understanding and using feedback have been well researched. Students in transition from secondary to tertiary education experience a range of challenges in the way they engage with feedback on assessments. Particular aspects that present difficulties for students are:

- understanding task requirements and marking criteria;
- the use of feedback from past assignments to inform work on future assignments.

Other acknowledged barriers are related to aspects of communication. Many authors have offered guidelines and principles for effective feedback, including Nicol and McFarlane (2006) and the National Union of Students. Much of this literature reinforces the role of the teacher as the agent of communication. It is argued by some that this in itself reinforces the difficulty of getting students to engage and that what is needed is to promote students’ active involvement (Sadler, 2010). Moreover, promoting students’ active involvement should go beyond simple engagement and aim for student empowerment, understood as the ‘ability to monitor, manage and evaluate one’s own learning’ (Nicol, 2009, p. 4).

From a teaching perspective, facilitating engagement is about devising interventions that encourage student participation in, and commitment to, study, whereas facilitating empowerment is about devising interventions that help students to take more control over, and responsibility for, their own learning (Nicol, 2009, p. 13).

Nicol (2010) argues that a shift in the conceptualisation of the whole feedback communication process needs to take place. Students need to be re-cast as agents in the process and constructors of feedback information as a way of overcoming the communication and engagement barriers. He argues that it is essential for students to...
‘analyse the message, ask questions about it, discuss it with others, connect it with prior understanding and use this to change future actions’ (Nicol, 2010 p.503). Key to Nicol’s proposed re-conceptualisation of feedback is its two-way nature (tutor-student and student-tutor) and the emphasis on process.

In the discussion below, strategies for improving students' engagement with feedback are grouped into three parts: those that focus on engaging students actively and enhancing their participation; those which encourage dialogue around feedback; and those which promote the active use of feedback.

**Strategies to assist understanding**

Strategies which prepare students to understand the feedback that they receive might be referred to as ‘feed-forward’ strategies. There are a number of different approaches that have been taken to raising students’ awareness of what feedback is, where it comes from and their understanding that there are different types. These approaches involve familiarising students with marking criteria and with the standards expected of them; and reconceptualising feedback as a dialogue between a student, their tutor and peers.

**Beyond understanding tasks and marking criteria**

It is considered to be good practice to give students information on assessment, marking criteria for a course and model answers. However, there is a convergence of opinion that simply giving information in advance is not sufficient to promote comprehension of the criteria and to convey expectations of quality (Lea and Street, 2000; Nicol, 2010; Nicol and MacFarlane, 2006; Rust et al., 2003). Rust et al. (2003) argue that this is because much of the knowledge that is needed is tacit.

Handley and Williams (2011) report on a study in which students were provided with online access to exemplar assignments with feedback annotations, in advance of their assessment deadline. The authors report on an earlier study by Orsmond et al., (2002) in which the use of exemplars along with student-created marking criteria reduced the marking difference between tutors and students. Unlike the small group of students (22) on the Orsmond et al. study, Handley and Williams’ research involved working with two large groups of 2nd year students working in pairs (400 students in Semester 1; 325 students in Semester 2). Page tracking and a student questionnaire showed that the resource had been extensively consulted and that students were positive about the exercise, although they had not taken up the option of engaging in online dialogue about the exemplars or the associated feedback. Course tutors raised concerns about student tendencies to accept the exemplars as model essays and to think that if an aspect of the essay was not commented upon it was ‘perfect’. The study also found that student marks were not improved subsequent to the exercise.

A smaller scale study in an Australian university provided first year Law students with an opportunity to mark and then discuss exemplars (Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong, 2011). The authors surveyed the students on the usefulness of the exercise and also on their reactions to feedback they were given subsequently on their own assignment. Students found the exercise useful overall. They used the exemplars to assist with the structure of their own work and saw them as a ‘concrete representation of what the teacher is looking for’ (Hendry et al., 2011, p. 8). The authors report that the students found the marking sheet useful to some degree, although difficult to apply to their own work.
Students need to be actively engaged with the documents and ideas. One way of getting this engagement is to involve students in using the marking criteria, much in the way of an expert (Nicol, 2010). This empowers the students, allowing them to take the lead as a means of enhancing their understanding of the marking criteria. Strategies to this end are described in the literature (Lea and Street, 2000; Nicol, 2010) and include:

- allowing students to create the criteria for an assignment
- asking students (in groups) to rephrase the requirements of a task in their own words
- having students take the role of experts and evaluate exemplary pieces of work; getting them to rewrite the task demands and perhaps set the assessment criteria that are used for the subsequent assessment.

**Self-assessment: macro and micro levels**

One of the most important sources of feedback is the self. Taras (2010) provides a definition of self-assessment as:

> all judgements by learners of their work: it subsumes self-evaluation and self-appraisal. Each model requires initiation of learners, both to reflective practice and to contextual assessment procedures and regulations (Taras, 2010, p. 200)

Primarily, self-assessment is about developing learners’ skills, not necessarily supplanting the role of the teacher. Self-assessment can work at the macro-level, developing students learning skills that might be key to a successful transition into higher education. At a second, micro-level, self-assessment is more focussed on particular assignments and a particular set of assessment criteria.

Raising students’ awareness of the impact of their previous (FE/school) experience of assessment and feedback on their ideas and approaches is crucial to help them to make the transition into a higher education feedback culture. Draper (2009) explains that secondary education emphasises improvements in technique and comments on ability. One challenge in their transition, he argues is therefore to encourage a focus on action that needs to be taken, rather than interpreting negative feedback as a reflection on their ability. A further new element is that higher education requires students to manage their own time and effort and they may need support on developing these skills (Draper, 2009).

A number of studies endorse the value of self-assessment for students’ learning (Andrade and Boulay, 2003; Andrade and Du, 2005). Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) focus on the value of self-assessing work in progress in relation to marking criteria. They emphasise that students need to be guided and supported in this and recommend a strategy that involves first the articulation of expectations, then students self-assess their own work on a particular sub-set of the marking criteria. The methods to support and record this process of self-assessment might include journals, checklists or questionnaires. Tutors can facilitate the process by supporting students in setting goals and identifying areas for improvement.

Draper (2009) writes that students need to learn new methods of learning and suggests that workshops, where students use different revision methods and then are tested, can allow them to draw personal inferences and support students in the adoption of new study approaches. In general, Draper notes that there are many feedback situations where there is considerable ambiguity inherent in the feedback and in the actions that should be derived
from that feedback. Comparative situations will help students draw their own inferences allowing them to disambiguate.

Self-assessment works well prior to or at the time of submission. Self-marking or self-appraisal is an example of a strategy to promote recognition of the self as a source of feedback. One technique is to require students to submit an informal response to some key questions along with the assignment (Elbow and Sorcinelli, 2006). An example of questions to guide self-assessment might be:

- What was your main point?
- What were your sub-points?
- Which parts of the assessment feel strong or weak?

**Peer feedback and peer assessment**

Obtaining multiple perspectives on assessment is an important source of enhancing understanding. In general, the benefits of peer support and interaction are well researched in the literature. Peer feedback and assessment are approaches to increasing the opportunities for feedback. Peer feedback can be shared via a discussion fora or in-class peer-review assessment tasks. An added benefit of the use of peer feedback is that students are trained and gain experience as assessors, equipping them with background knowledge which will help them to interpret their own feedback. Nicol (2010, p.512) argues that peer feedback is an effective way of:

- heightening students’ reflection
- interacting with feedback from a wider range of perspectives
- engaging students in making and receiving judgements.

Sadler (2009) suggests some strategies to enable peer feedback. One example is to ask students to write short essays (300 word length) and to provide three anonymised copies. Students then mark each others’ work. Sadler does not report findings on the effectiveness of this approach but he advocates the idea, based on the rationale that students’ active engagement is promoted as they reflect on the assessment goals and criteria. A further benefit is that the use of this task increases the amount of feedback that they receive. This approach also assists with understanding multiple points of view. Draper (2009) suggests that obtaining multiple perspectives on one’s work is a way of disambiguating feedback. Similar strategies can be adopted prior to submission of an assignment, with peer-feedback workshops for peers to review each other’s drafts and help improve them.

Sadler (2009) also argues for what he calls ‘agenda setting’, or constructing marking criteria, as a way to help students see and understand the reasons for quality. He feels that this is a way of educating students in making appraisals in ways which are similar to those of expert assessors. Four key questions to drive peer assessment could be:

- How well does the work achieve the purpose intended?
- What are the grounds for achieving a particular grade?
- How could the work be improved?
There are a number of articles which argue that the effectiveness of peer assessment is improved with training and experience and which suggest approaches (Gielen et al. 2011; van Zundert et al., 2010).

**Feedback as dialogue**

In the recent past there has been a considerable focus on strategies which improve the communication of feedback to students. However, some critics argue that what needs to be promoted is the two-way and dialogic nature of feedback, that is in order to empower and engage students in feedback, they need to have a voice in the process of feedback communication.

Evidence shows that many students do not read the feedback that they receive. For many, engagement stops once the mark has been discovered (Draper, 2009; Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2005). Draper (2009) explains that this occurs when the mark obtained corresponds to the students’ set goals or objective. At NTU (and in the literature) some strategies have been reported to better engage students in reading feedback. Some lecturers at NTU publish cohort feedback for the group in the appropriate NOW Learning Rooms. In addition to written comments, other media (audio or video) can be used to this end. Cohort feedback, delivered in advance of individual feedback, is seen as an effective way of prompting students to read feedback.

Hepplestone et al (2009) reported positive effects of withholding marks on an assignment and releasing the feedback first and then the grade after a period of time. Another strategy is to require students to submit a reflective piece on the feedback received prior to being given their mark.

There are a range of strategies which are intended to give students a voice in the tutor-student feedback process. This can be encouraged by providing students with an opportunity to engage in discussion with tutor and also by offering a degree of choice in the process. An example might be giving students’ choice over the timing of the feedback. Students might choose to have detailed feedback on their draft before submission and this might be chosen over feedback after the assignment. Unless this is aligned with School or institutional policy, however, this may lead to higher marking loads for tutors (Handley and Williams, 2011). There may however be techniques such as those described in the peer-feedback section that might be applied here.

Another way of increasing students’ control over feedback is giving them the option to request (at the time of submission) feedback on specific points in their work. This promotes self-assessment and allows students to gain control over particular aspects of their work and to tailor the feedback that they receive according to their needs. Some studies report the use of interactive cover sheets where an additional space was added to the usual cover sheet and students could request specific feedback. Bloxham and Campbell (2010) reported positive reactions from students, although it is worth noting that the authors report that students had difficulty in formulating high level questions.

Nicol (2010) reports on a number of ways to increase the ‘richness’ of the dialogue between students; two are particularly relevant here. The first is to set collaborative assignments. He reports on a large cohort (560) of first year Psychology students who were required to work in groups of 7-8 to produce six essays over the course of the academic year. While the tutor provided guidance, he restricted his feedback to whole-cohort feedback, leaving
essay/group specific feedback to student peers. After submission the students chose exemplars and students were encouraged to compare their own work to these. Nicol (2010) reports that students were positive about the exercise and that the tutor reported an increase in mean essay scores in the final year examinations over those of previous years. Nicol’s second approach was to allow students to see the full range of comments that a tutor leaves on student work. He suggests that students could be asked to decide which of the comments are most relevant to their work and say how they will act on the feedback. Nicol points out that the range of feedback given to students could be from previous cohorts.

These processes and steps might be conducted with the tutor or groups of peers or, as with self-assessment, they could be noted in a learning journal.

**Feedback as action**

Feedback can be ambiguous in terms of what action should be pursued. Quinton and Smallbone (2010, p.129) suggest a strategy for guiding students towards reflection on what action to take. Their proposed strategy is to use a reflection on feedback sheet that prompts students to reflect on:

- emotion
- evaluation of feedback received
- actions they should take.

This can feed into a PDP programme. This same study reports that some students were not able to articulate an ‘action’ plan, and instead they became demoralised. This perhaps suggests that knowing what action to take is important, and that students might need help with this. It might therefore be necessary to prompt students on possible actions they might take after reflecting on feedback. Draper (2009, p. 309) identifies possible self-regulatory actions that a learner can follow after feedback (this is not a closed list):

- improve knowledge and skills
- manage time and effort better
- seek out and try new ideas
- change course
- persist
- get a second opinion.

Other support for students in drawing up an action plan for feedback may involve group discussion and drafting of action plans (Nicol, 2010) in addition to the use of activities such as those outlined for self-assessment and peer-assessment. These could be used to encourage students to engage with the feedback they have received and to act on it with a view to pursuing actions.
References


