Project Title: Feeding forward from feedback with Business and Food first years

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Learner Numbers: 116 Business and Food first year students (planned c.120)

Rationale: Across the sector, students score feedback relatively low on the NSS surveys; feedback is an ongoing concern for most universities. This project sought to understand how students at Harper Adams use feedback received in their subsequent modules and to establish whether an intervention can encourage better use of feedback.

Rust (2007) in "How to make your feedback work in three easy steps" suggests starting by "encouraging the application of feedback by asking students to use their feedback to improve their later assignments". Conference papers delivered at the 4th Assessment in HE Conference (2013) by Hepplestone noted the need to "help students to make connections" whilst O'Boyle proposed that students should be supported "to instil a change of emphasis in their approach from *marks* to *improvement and learning*".

Research Question: Does a requirement for students to link the feedback from one module to another encourage them to reflect and implement the feedback received from the earlier module?

Method: The key objective was to encourage students to use feedback to improve their subsequent work. The new Academic Development (AD) assignment introduced the requirement for students to reflect on formative feedback from the Report Advisor Tutor and note how they have used this feedback to develop their work prior to final submission.

Students were then asked to link their summative feedback from the AD assignment in the preparation of their assignment for Introduction to Research Methods (IRM). Both assignments involve writing a formal report and the assessment criterion for both includes report writing and referencing. These are important skills which students need to develop in their first year to prepare for subsequent years.

Task 2 of the IRM assignment asked students to summarise the feedback they had received from their AD report and explain how they had acted on this in preparing their IRM assignment (see Appendix 1 for extract of assignment brief). Students had been asked to write in the first person to encourage reflection. No marks were specifically linked to this task nor was any word count stated.

116 students completed task 2, although a very small number chose not to include this reflection. Students' responses ranged from a few short sentences to a page of reflection. As no prescribed structure had been given students were able to address this question in their own style. To respond to this, a thematic approach was adopted in the analysis of these reflections.

Excel was used to summarise the comments made by each student, using the structure of "Area, feedback received, action taken". As the assignments were marked by two staff this summarising activity was completed by the relevant marker. Marker one analysed 56 students, marker two analysed 62 students so the workload was fairly evenly split. Student comments were numbered for tracking purposes within the analysis but this was not linked to student identification numbers so all analysis was anonymous.

Once the thematic summaries were completed these were reviewed by marker one to standardise the categorisation and level of detail documented. This could only be done from the Excel summary data as the assignments were being prepared to be returned to students. In total, 323 comments were analysed, an average of almost 3 per student (2.78). At the high end, 12 students had comments on at least 5 areas to address, whereas 13 students only identified one area. Where only one area was noted there was no overriding theme for this, although Referencing and Citations (3) and Language (3) were most prevalent.

Through a process of review an initial 48 themes were standardised and reduced to a more manageable 8. None of the 8 themes are a surprise; report writing requires a range of skills and knowledge which can be grouped into subjects.

Findings: As Table 1 illustrates three main areas were identified by almost half the students, with a further three themes noted by a third or a quarter of students. As this feedback is from their first piece of academic writing at university which focuses on developing academic skills then it is unsurprising that 68% highlighted feedback received on Referencing and Citations as relevant to their IRM report.

Table 1: Themes identified

Theme	No. of comments	% of students
Referencing and citations	79	68%
Structure	63	54%
Language	54	47%
Research and evidence	38	33%
Evaluation	29	25%
Proof read	29	25%
Tables and labelling	22	19%
Paraphrase	9	8%
Total	323	

Feedback on the structure of reports was observed by 54% of students, with feedback on language identified by 47% of students. Each of these themes will be addressed further, drawing on the actions students reflected that they had taken.

Table 2 summarises the main feedback areas students recognised within the themes identified. Where many students had identified receiving feedback on a theme there was often a pattern to the feedback, linking to the requirements of report writing. This adds a useful review to the feedback of the Academic Development markers whose feedback comments are brought to light in this project.

Table 2: Themes and feedback areas

Theme	Feedback received
Referencing and citations	Alphabetical order; attention to detail; use of citations and also required for each statement
Structure	Contents page; Introduction; Conclusion; Summary; font and page numbers
Language	Avoid abbreviations; formal style; spelling and punctuation; shorter sentences and third person
Research and evidence	Expand on research; wider reading, not just internet; include supporting evidence and support all points
Evaluation	Not just descriptive; develop points; question the data (what, why, how); use more sources and be critical
Proof read	edit and check work; proofread grammar; spelling, and check for making sense
Tables and labelling	Labelling tables and figures; titles; sources; formatting and refer to appropriately (before and after) in text
Paraphrase	Paraphrase rather than quote and avoid long quotes

Whilst the recognition of feedback themes is useful, the action students have reflected they have taken is of greater importance. Although some direct quotations from work have been taken, much of their commentary was summarised during the analysis process for ease of comparison and also time constraints.

The actions will be addressed by theme.

i)   Referencing and citations

Feedback received by students on referencing and citations covered the need to produce reference lists in alphabetical order, include citations for each statement and pay attention to detail. Of the 79 comments in this theme it was pleasing to note that 50% of these specifically mentioned the Guide to Referencing within their action. Students noted they had addressed the alphabetical order requirement by reviewing their work.

On use of citations students commented that they had read Guide to Referencing for date and source and put the reference *[sic]* within the sentence rather than just at the

end. As one student noted "I now realise this is essential to quote references for all statements made."

The markers noted that reference lists were generally well presented although more use could have been made of citations. Staff from the Academic Guidance team had run a session in the Senior Tutor programme with both the Business and Food students which may have improved awareness and knowledge.

ii) Structure

Most of the feedback students highlighted related to the sections of the report including the Contents page, Summary, Introduction and Conclusion. Some students also noted issues with suitable font and page numbers.

7 students (11%) mentioned using the Guide to Report Writing, a much lower figure that the Guide to Referencing. To improve contents pages students commented they had used Word to produce their contents table from the report section headings and also listed all figures/tables. With the Summary section students had sought a "very brief overview of my report" and tried to include statistics. Others also tried to make different from their Introduction (although the marker disagreed). "Concise introductions" had been written and one student noted "used checklist for introduction". Within their Conclusions students felt they had referred back to main points and commented they were addressing this section better as they understood the requirements more clearly. An interesting observation from a student noted this as "one of the hardest things to transition from A-levels".

On other presentation related issues students mentioned using Calibri or Arial font and checking for consistent font size throughout. To address issues with page numbers students noted they had included page numbers or started numbering later (and in this instance the marker noted the page numbering was correct).

Staff considered students were over-confident in their achievements in this section. Summaries were particularly disappointing, with most failing to include any of their findings. Introductions were better but staff also noted the Guide to Report Writing suggested a different emphasis for an Introduction than was sought for this report so there was an internal issue to address. Issues with font sizes changing still occurred and many aspects of page numbering were not correctly applied.

iii) Language

Almost half the students (47%) identified language and writing style as areas where AD feedback was relevant for their IRM report. Issues included inappropriate use of abbreviations, adopting a formal writing style, spelling and punctuation, the need to shorten sentences and writing in the third person.

One student noted that use of abbreviations was "my biggest downfall in AD, getting out of this habit was my main focus". To improve the formality of writing style students' reflections included reading the Guide to Report Writing especially the comparison of essays and reports and choosing words more carefully to ensure a

more formal style, including use of a thesaurus. Examples included a student who highlighted using words like "examine", "consider", "discuss" rather than "will look at". Another student commented that rephrasing "freed up word count" to enable them to remain within the word limit set.

Spelling and punctuation issues were addressed in a range of ways with actions such as contacting Jane Reeves (Academic Guidance) for support with grammar, spelling and structure before the hand in date and also students who noted that they ran spelling and grammar checks in Word. To seek shorter sentences actions included rewording sentences, especially if over two lines long; simplifying sentences or making into two sentences and using the synonym function in Word. For those who noted writing in the third person was an action comments included being careful to avoid personal pronouns.

Staff found several examples of work where all these areas were still an issue. Lack of recognition of the problem by students was illustrated with the comments "should be easily fixed by just reading over my work for IRM, possibly out loud". However it was pleasing to note several references made to using Academic Guidance and Learner Support staff for assistance in this area.

iv)   Research and evidence
The need for research and evidence was identified by one in three students. Feedback comments from AD covered the need to expand on research, read more widely, not just use internet sources and to include supporting evidence for all points.

To widen their research students noted they had read a range of sources then considered the appropriate section of the assignment to include these in. One student commented "I try and ensure all points have reliable references" whilst another noted "researching more sources and take care where source is from". Mention was made of using the 'Find it at Harper' on-line search tool. Elsewhere a student noted they "explored the topic in wider detail and used a range of reliable references e.g. Mintel"." A student who noted avoiding "taking it all from the top of my head" commented in they had "taken information from a lot more sources to create a well-balanced report". Students also commented they had checked dates to seek current sources.

In reviewing these comments staff noted a student comment that they had read more widely but the reference list only contained three sources (insufficient to meet the criteria). Not all students have recognised the level of preparation expected and the need to evidence their reading.

v)   Evaluation
A quarter of students were seeking to improve their evaluation skills based on feedback from AD. Students noted their feedback advised work should not just be descriptive; there was a need to develop points. Many identified the requirement of questioning the data adding the phrase "what, why, how". Mention was also made of the need to use more sources and be critical.

It was encouraging to see reflections such as "I have interpreted the data, explained the results and their impact on other factors". Elsewhere students were seeking to link the text to the title and stick to the question asked, whilst others "tried to not go off at tangents". When questioning the data comments included "I evaluated data in table in more detail, interpreting and explaining, and linking to other factors". Mention was also made of using both a wider range of and more current sources.

Evaluation is a higher level skill and whilst some students demonstrated a good level of evaluation others do not recognise the need or identify that they have not achieved it. "What, why and how" seemed to be popular to describe this issue and it may be worth promoting this phrase (and requirement) more actively across other module assignments.

vi) Proof read

The need to proof read work was noted by a quarter of students. Feedback areas from AD included editing and checking work, proofreading grammar and spelling and the requirement for the report to "make sense". Actions noted by students included double checking and printing out couple of times, proof reading carefully and "do in small parts step by step". This seemed to be a more common approach as another student noted "read after each task completed and overall once finished". It was good to discover students who linked quality to higher marks: "read three times as it makes a difference to the quality of work produced to lead to a better mark" and "to gain a higher standard I have taken time to proofread carefully before deadlines".

Some students noted using a third party to read their work and others recognised wider benefits, noting that "proof reading helped check if paragraphs were linked well".

It is interesting to note a quarter of students included this aspect of the report writing process as by the time they reach university it may seem a surprise they have not recognised the need to check their work carefully. A lack of time and attention to detail often featured in reflections and it would have been interesting to see if there was any correlation between degree level (BSc or FdSc) and proofreading.

vii) Tables and labelling

19% of students recognised feedback on tables and labels as relevant in their IRM assignment. A comment noted "AD feedback helped on table layout, which was useful for IRM". Issues over both format and reference to tables in the text were a concern.

Details including the location of labels were checked by students based on prior feedback. A student added "I looked at my data and experimented with formats to make easy to read for the reader." A few students sought assistance from the Academic Guidance team. Several students noted they had referred to the table "before and after in the text".

The main issue across all reports was reference to tables in the report so the message "text before and after table" will be promoted more actively in IRM and repeated at the start of the second year.

viii)   Paraphrase

9 students listed paraphrasing as a feedback aspect from their AD report. Their comments included "I have paraphrased to show I understand what I read" and the need to "interpret myself, I find this difficult". Use of quotes was identified by most of the 9, with actions such as "use minimal quotes" or "used no quotes". It was encouraging to read the student who added "I have practiced paraphrasing and am much better at interpreting author's ideas in my words".

Conclusion

It must be noted that the action of asking about use of feedback may have triggered reflection by some students that would not have taken place otherwise, so our study, by its nature, influences our results. However, as the purpose of the activity was to encourage reflection and implementation this was for the benefit of students.

All students who responded to this activity were able, at some level, to meaningfully link their feedback from AD to the report writing requirements of IRM. Some students were not clear on exactly how they had acted on the feedback, keeping comments general rather than being specific. Some pointed out their marks had improved as a result; others noted they expected higher marks to result from their efforts. The improvement areas ranged from procedural to evaluative. Likewise, the depth of reflection varied from the superficial to the transformative.

It was encouraging to note the range of support services being used by students including Academic Guidance, Learner Support and the IT helpdesk. It was also interesting to discover the tools students were using within Word, from spelling and grammar checks to synonym functions and using headings to create contents pages.

At the apparently superficial end of the reflection scale students appeared to underestimate the degree of change required in their work, believing they had resolved issues with little change in their behaviour. Those who noted they "just need to…", "should be easily fixed by …" or "this is exactly what I have done throughout this report" imply a simple solution is sufficient.

In the mid-point students identified actions they had taken, noting these were not always easy adjustments from their previous style of writing. They recognised the required standards had not been achieved in their early work but were not always clear or confident that they had achieved the correct level this time. Comments here included "getting better", "taken care to…" or "helped me to prepare" were noted.

However, there are those for whom the feedback appears to have altered their approach to report writing. This suggests a serious consideration of the feedback received. These students identify practicing, taking more time, reviewing several times, thinking, creating links, evaluating and explaining. As one student noted of AD

"I found the feedback system very simple to understand and a great benefit to improve in future work". Another noted that research "helps me back up my argument and gain a better understanding of topic, helping other modules too".

Proposed Actions

1. Improve the feedback journey throughout a student's study period by using a structured reflection and guidance form (to be developed):

    i)   Use the 8 themes to discuss the feedback students received from AD with both new first years and continuing second years in Senior Tutor sessions. Ask first years to group their AD feedback comments into these headings plus "Other" to create a Summary sheet. [What format is feedback currently given in?] Then ask students, by theme, what action are you going to take?

    ii)   Link the IRM reflection task to this Summary sheet. Then, using the Summary form, give feedback to each student on their progress on addressing their action areas.

    iii)   Consider linking the IRM feedback a student received on report writing to a second year module requiring a report format. For example, ask students to create the Summary sheet using the latest feedback they received; the action taken in this assignment and then staff give guidance on the evidence of appropriate action taken or re-direct the student if required. This action could also involve other submission structures if the relevant elements from the list of 8 themes were selected.

    iv)   Aim to conclude this process by linking the latest feedback received into the HRP/Professional Project. As students will be returning from placement this may be a useful "return to study" activity in Senior Tutor sessions.

    v)   To ensure a consistent message we need a fairly small marking team across the modules involved and liaison throughout the process.

    vi)   Consider asking staff in the Food department if they are interested in using this Summary form structure in later modules too.

2. Use the 8 themes to provide more exemplars of student work in IRM, particularly work requiring improvement and discuss in the IRM writing styles workshop.

3. Add more Academic Guidance sessions to all student cohorts in Business Senior Tutor sessions for 2104/15, linking first year topics to these 8 themes.

4. Share these results with both Academic Development and Academic Guidance tutors for further reflection on its use within the university.