Exploring students' concepts of feedback as articulated in large-scale surveys: a useful proxy and some encouraging nuances

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Abstract
Surveys asking Higher Education students about feedback tend to find similar results: feedback should be prompt, specific, understandable and regular. Efforts to improve the feedback experience therefore emphasises that feedback be more frequent, detailed and turnaround times reduced. However, indications that students misunderstand key phrases in the questions or have limited conceptions of feedback have also led to suggestions that these surveys should not be as influential as they currently are.

To explore students' understanding of feedback in greater detail, 613 students completed a 35-item survey about a specific time they received feedback during a work-based learning placement. Results indicate that students typically saw feedback as straightforward communication where an expert tells them what to do. However, principal component analysis of the survey responses indicated a pattern of responses in which students tacitly hold a more sophisticated understanding of feedback. Their patterns of response directly challenge many of the ways that feedback provision is currently monitored, suggesting better ways to evaluate and improve feedback provision. Curiously, these patterns of response had a close relationship with the standard questions used in the UK's National Student Survey. Results therefore suggest that this national survey is still a robust measure of satisfaction with feedback, but learning how to improve the feedback experience requires asking different questions.

Keywords
Feedback; feedforward; work-based learning; mentoring; dialogue; student satisfaction

Introduction

Surveys of students in Higher Education are in broad agreement about what students want from their feedback: it should occur regularly throughout the course rather than being solely at the end, give specific advice for improvement, be accurate, and be given both promptly and in time for students to make changes before they are graded (Bols & Wicklow, 2013). Very similar sentiments have also been expressed in workplace feedback (Tulgan, 1999). However, despite seeming clear about what students want, surveys of student satisfaction have seen little improvement in items relating to feedback, with little effect on learning (Doan, 2013; Price et al., 2010). This failure to improve learning by giving students what they want questions whether we can assume that the customer is always right (Price, 2013), or if the questions used in the national surveys have a too simplistic notion of feedback (Nicol, 2013). Similarly, giving students what they want from feedback can be seen as failing to challenge the more fundamental problem of overly-strategic student approaches to assessment, which in turn severely limits wider learning (Carless, 2006).

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The sample for this study was deliberately chosen feedback from the work-based element of undergraduate teacher training courses because this offers a case of very frequent, specific, and timely feedback and tutor contact on a level simply unsustainable in HE more generally - if problems still occur here, it is therefore clear that the solution is not to be found through increasing feedback quantity, frequency, detail or speed. Trainee teachers also have some training in Assessment for Learning principles, so might be better equipped with the vocabulary and critical stance to reflect on their own experiences of feedback.

Participants were prompted with 35 questionnaire items drawn from a range of surveys which are commonly used to evaluate students' experience of, or satisfaction with, learning, assessment and feedback. A large sample size (613) enabled principal component analysis, a statistical method which looks for similar patterns of responses. Inferring an underlying meaning to these patterns suggests more subtle ways in which these students might explain their feedback experience. Since none of these patterns seemed to relate to satisfaction as something underlying responses, correlation analysis was also used to see how common measures of student satisfaction related to these newly-formed patterns. This makes the case that currently preferred methods of evaluating student satisfaction with feedback fail to connect with the reality of how students conceptualise feedback, but nevertheless function as highly effective proxies. This offers hope that these new ways of thinking about feedback will not only offer improvements to practice, but that those improvements can be trusted to deliver increases in all-important student satisfaction scores.

Components of feedback in higher education

Feedback models can be usefully thought of as varying along a continuum from conventional to sustainable feedback practices (Carless, 2015), with the latter typically taking a longer-term view of student learning. The models might also be usefully considered by how they conceptualise the role of the learner, the intent of the feedback, and the nature of knowledge. For example, a conventional model might see the learner as the recipient of knowledge which their expert tutor shares with them by pointing out flaws in their work. In contrast, a sustainable model would see the learner as a co-creator of knowledge being facilitated by dialogue with an expert so that a tacit understanding of complex knowledge can be gradually shared. The language in this distinction makes it clear which model is currently favoured, as no academic would proudly claim that their feedback is unsustainable. More recent models of feedback can therefore be seen to draw heavily on constructivist ideals, however the reality of everyday practice is often closer to behaviourist or didactic approaches (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Practice might also draw on what is seen as a pragmatic blend, for example using behaviourist strategies to force students to engage with the more demanding role that sustainable feedback practices demand of them (Withey, 2013).

What the learner intends to do with feedback can also be seen as relating to the literature on student approaches to learning (Marton et al., 1984), so learners are seen as using feedback either for assessment outcomes (surface approaches) or for more long-term outcomes (deep approaches). This affects, for example, whether a student sees a need to mine for clues in the feedback and, ultimately, whether feedback is seen as the servant of learning or the servant of assessment. Feedback might even be seen as a game of relations (Watkins, 2000), where the main objective is to reinforce a positive relationship with an assessor, based on the assumption that this is more useful than any particular content in the feedback.

How learner intent is conceptualised also has some impact on how the learner's role is understood by the tutor, but this can also be thought of as a separate component in its own right. These roles

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can be summarised as either a recipient, initiator or co-creator of knowledge. Askew and Lodge (2000) relate each to a different type of model of feedback, so for example a recipient role assumes a receptive-transmission model, in which feedback is given by an expert to the learner as a gift. The learner as initiator is similar in that the knowledge is given as a gift, but this time the learner can both seek feedback on specific points and has a role in deciding whether or not to accept feedback. Finally, the learner as co-creator underpins dialogic models of feedback. In this case, the tutor may still have expert status but the student's role is not to absorb that expert knowledge but to use it as scaffolding for building their own knowledge.

How the learner is positioned in relation to knowledge can also be seen as related to how that knowledge is conceptualised. More recent models suggest that this is through a constructivist lens (Sadler, 2010), with more attention being given to gradual development of knowledge which might be tacitly held. However, there is still a strong tradition of seeing knowledge from a behaviourist tradition where it is transmitted from the expert to the learner, which typically positions the learner as a recipient (Boud & Molloy, 2013). This may be strongly affected by assessment: when the person giving feedback is also an assessor making subjective judgements, there is an obvious incentive for a student to understand their tutor's way of thinking, but if assessment requires memorisation then the focus is on transmitting knowledge as efficiently as possible.

Discussing models of feedback in this level of detail highlights just how oversimplified advice to educators can be. In the UK, Nicol (2013) explains this may be a result of institutions being too narrowly concerned with feedback as it is articulated in national student satisfaction surveys, that the aim is to improve ratings of feedback rather than the effectiveness of feedback. For example, the demand that feedback be provided within two weeks seems perfectly reasonable provided the workload is managed so that this process is not overly rushed, but the timescale does not seem to relate to any principle of feedback but is instead simply what seems a satisfactory level of service. Mendes et al. (2011) found that nearly half of students they surveyed showed misunderstanding of the meaning of prompt, so focusing on delivering feedback within two weeks might be a wasted effort if students do not see this as prompt, or even appreciate that 'prompt' relates to time. Similarly, the idea that assessment criteria be explicitly referenced simplifies quality control processes but neglects the way that assessment criteria are typically used (Bloxham, 2012), which may even distract the tutor from providing helpful feedback if, for example, they feel a need to mention all the criteria.

The current emphasis on dialogic feedback also demands that students take on much more active roles, a difficult challenge for tutors who feel a need to be pro-active (Watkins, 2000) or who are under pressure to just give students what they want. Schon (1987) describes the qualities of a coach in forming a dialogic relationship, building on his hugely influential model of reflective practice (Schon, 1983). In teacher education more specifically, Graham (2006, p. 1126) reports a group of teacher tutors expecting that their student teachers would "identify areas of strength and weakness that they would explore together". Both of these examples focus on the learner determining what they want from feedback, although there is a risk that this does not lead to genuine engagement but rather the learner simply having more say in what their feedback 'gift' will be.

A similar problem is who takes responsibility for feedback being used to support learning. Boud and Molloy (2013) make a strong case for this being the tutor's responsibility, to the extent that feedback which is not acted upon does not even deserve to be called feedback. Feedback might also separate students learning to self-assess from students learning how to complete a task which their

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tutor assesses. From this perspective, it is less important that the learner understands the required standard so long as they can reliably produce that standard. Feedback therefore can to a large extent be forced upon students and still deliver performance gains (Withey, 2013), although this might seem a dangerous strategy if student satisfaction is an important measure.

In summary, current feedback practices and models can be seen as different based on how they conceptualise the role of the learner, the nature of knowledge, and the intent of the learner (and, by extension, the intent of the tutor). Students tend not to have such sophisticated definitions of feedback to worry about these issues, typically adopting a passive conceptualisation from their secondary education (Sambell et al., 2012). However, this will not be the case for all students, and it is therefore important that "when we refer to feedback, we need to be aware that it means different things to different people" (Carless, 2015, p. 192). Understanding these differences is crucial to understanding contradictions in the literature, such as students demanding more feedback whilst failing to collect it (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Carless, 2006) or not following what tutors feel is clear guidance (Dysthe, 2011). There is significant pressure on tutors to deliver feedback which can have contradicting purposes: three key tensions being feedback which improves a students' performance in assessment, feedback which develops students' long-term learning, and feedback which students rate positively in course evaluations. A starting point in unravelling these tensions is to be clear on what makes up students' understanding of feedback.

Procedure

A survey was constructed from items in existing surveys related to learning, assessment and feedback, in particular approaches to teaching standards (O'Pry & Schumacher, 2012), experiences of assessment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2003), and approaches to learning (ETL project, 2002). Items were modified or added to based on the advice of Fink (2009), such as removing double-barrelling questions and leading statements. For example, the item "I pay careful attention to any advice or feedback I'm given, and try to improve my understanding" (ETL project, 2002) was confusing as it contained two distinct ideas, paying careful attention and using feedback to improve understanding, so was split into two separate items. Comments from a pilot with group of tutors also suggested that 'understanding' might be a confusing term as it could mean understanding of pedagogy or understanding the tutor's intent. My two items were therefore "I paid careful attention to any advice or feedback I was given" and "I used the advice and feedback to improve my practice generally", with separate items again for "to figure out how to get the best grade" or "to figure out what they really wanted me to do". A 5-point response scale was used, with options to strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree or strongly agree. Participants were asked to leave blank any items which were not applicable.

Further questions were created based on a literature review with the aim of creating a large number of items which would eventually be reduced to fit onto 2 printed pages and give a range of possible responses related to different models of feedback. Whilst Yorke's research with similar surveys suggested that acquiescence bias (in which respondents simply agree with statements) was not a significant concern, some reversal of phrasing was used "to disrupt any lazy or 'auto-pilot' tendency" (Yorke, 2009, p. 724). This amendment was also based on feedback from pilots where some students and tutors felt that there was an overall bias to the survey. Overall, following ethical approval, four pilot groups were used: one of tutors and three small groups (10-15) of students, with some modifications made after each round to help clarify the meaning of some items.

The 35 items included in the final version of the survey are listed below.

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No.	Questionnaire item text
1.	In feedback sessions/meetings, my contributions were welcomed
2.	The feedback was tailored for me as an individual learner
3.	Feedback gave me clear priorities for my next observation
4.	I carefully looked at my previous feedback when planning for my next lessons
5.	I carefully looked at my previous feedback when planning for my next observation
6.	It was important to be seen to act on feedback
7.	I made sure that my observed lesson had something special in it
8.	I made sure that my observed lesson used an idea from the main person who gave me feedback
9.	My observed lessons were the same as my normal practice
10.	I had some special activities which I save for observed lessons
11.	I tried out my observed lessons beforehand to make sure they worked
12.	The feedback from different observations on the same placement was inconsistent
13.	I would have behaved the same in feedback sessions even if placements were not assessed
14.	I was confident about assessing the quality of my own work
15.	I trusted my own judgement more than the judgement of the main person who gave me feedback
16.	It would not have been appropriate to question the decisions of the main person who gave me feedback
17.	I didn't just focus on what the main person who gave me feedback wanted, I did what I felt was important
18.	I trusted that if I did what I was told then everything would work out in the end
19.	The main purpose of the feedback sessions seemed to be to reinforce the status of the main person who gave me feedback
20.	The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(a)...to improve faults in my teaching
21.	(b)...to guide me to improve generally
22.	(c)...to help me meet my own goals
23.	(d)...to make sure the pupils got good lessons
24.	(e)...to make me work harder
25.	(f)...to make sure I had evidence for each QTS standard
26.	(g)...to prove that the school had met their responsibilities to the university
27.	The grade I received was not influenced, positively or negatively, by any personal factors between me and the person who gave me the grade
28.	I pushed myself to make a good job of every task, whether or not I thought it was important

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No.	Questionnaire item text
29.	I paid careful attention to any advice or feedback I was given
30.	Feedback came in time to be useful
31.	Feedback matched up with observation focus criteria
32.	I used the advice and feedback to...(a)...improve my practice generally
33.	(b)...figure out how to get the best grade
34.	(c)...figure out what they really wanted me to do
35.	The expectations on me were far too high

The survey was compiled through Bristol Online Surveys and emailed to all students enrolled on teacher training undergraduate courses in each of two sample universities. From a possible 1321 students with valid email, 140 completed the survey. To supplement this, printed versions of the same survey were given out to student teachers at the end of lectures, bringing the total number of participants to 613 from a total of 1554 students approached either online or in person, giving a response rate of 39.5%. To speed up analysis and minimise data entry errors, QueXF software was used to automate some of the data entry. The data was checked and cleaned ahead of analysis, with checks made to ensure that there were no significant differences in response based on the survey completion method or campus of study.

Principal component analysis was used to look for patterns of response. Rotation was used to help separate some of the components, and their most significant loadings were arranged into a table. This gave components which were then modified to avoid overlapping items. Descriptive labels were given to help explain each component and mean scores used to map each component to a 5-point scale. The verbal labels given to each component represented the most subjective stage of the analysis, and so was checked with audiences at two academic conferences (Research in Professional Learning Environments 2015 and Assessment in Higher Education 2015) to ensure that they made sense and were not forcing the data into an inappropriate shape.

Descriptive statistics were then used to explain the overall experience of feedback expressed in the survey in terms of these components. Correlation was also used to look for relationships between the components so as to form the foundation for a model of how feedback was understood by these students. Finally, each component was checked for correlation with a component constructed around how satisfaction ratings are measured, offering a direct comparison between these components and the dominant way feedback is currently evaluated.

Results

The rotated principal component solution gave five components. These are summarised in the table below, with the strength of each item's contribution to each component given in brackets (negative numbers indicating disagreement with that item). For clarity and to avoid overlapping items, only loadings above 0.5 were considered. Interpreting a narrative behind each component therefore involves reading down the list in each component, giving preference to the higher ranked items. For example, item 32 was the most influential item in the pattern of responses expressed as component 1.

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Component	Contributing items
1	32 I used the advice and feedback to...(i)...improve my practice generally (.697) 23 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(iv)...to make sure the pupils got good lessons (.692) 21 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(ii)...to guide me to improve generally (.691) 33 I used the advice and feedback to...(ii)...figure out how to get the best grade (.682) 34 I used the advice and feedback to...(iii)...figure out what they really wanted me to do (.678) 29 I paid careful attention to any advice or feedback I was given (.638) 20 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(i)...to improve faults in my teaching (.617) 22 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(iii)...to help me meet my own goals (.602) 24 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(v)...to make me work harder (.583) 28 I pushed myself to make a good job of every task, whether or not I thought it was important (.573) 31 Feedback matched up with observation focus criteria (.547) 30 Feedback came in time to be useful (.538) 25 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(vi)...to make sure I had evidence for each QTS standard (.531)
2	1 In feedback sessions, my contributions were welcomed (-.741) 2 The feedback was tailored for me as an individual learner (-.633) 12 The feedback from different observations on the same placement was inconsistent (.644) 3 Feedback gave me clear priorities for my next observation (-.640) 31 Feedback matched up with observation focus criteria (-.629) 30 Feedback came in time to be useful (-.623) 35 The expectations on me were far too high (.594) 22 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(iii)...to help me meet my

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Component	Contributing items
	own goals (-.590) 19 The main purpose of the feedback sessions seemed to be to reinforce the status of the main person who gave me feedback (.550) 21 The main purpose of the feedback seemed to be...(ii)...to guide me to improve generally (-.502)
3	10 I had some special activities which I saved for observed lessons (.659) 7 I made sure that my observed lesson had something special in it (.611) 8 I make sure that my observed lesson used an idea from the main person who gave me feedback (.525)
4	4 I carefully looked at my previous feedback when planning for my next lessons (.768) 5 I carefully looked at my previous feedback when planning for my next observation (.745) 6 It was important to be seen to act on feedback (.601) 29 I paid careful attention to any advice or feedback I was given (.570) 32 I used the advice and feedback to...(i)...improve my practice generally (.548) 28 I pushed myself to make a good job of every task, whether or not I thought it was important (.525)
5	15 I trusted my own judgement more than the judgement of the main person who gave me feedback (.604) 14 I was confident about assessing the quality of my own work (.543)
Satisfaction rating	3 Feedback gave me clear priorities for my next observation 30 Feedback came in time to be useful 31 Feedback matched up with observation focus criteria
Numbers indicate questionnaire item number in the survey. Numbers in brackets indicate the loading, so negative numbers indicate disagreement with that item. For example, component 2 includes a pattern of response which agrees with item 12 and disagrees with item 1. Note that loadings are not given for satisfaction rating as this was not derived from principal component analysis.	

Each of these five component was then checked for correlation with the other components and an extra component based on items which would summarise satisfaction with feedback. These six

components were then used with variance tests (either chi-squared or ANOVA depending on the number of groups). There were no statistically significant differences in responses based on data collection method (online survey vs. paper survey) or students' year of study (ranging from 1 to 4). Female students were slightly more likely to score higher on components one (chi sq=22.1, p=.054, mean difference=.255) and five (chi sq=25.135, p=.048, mean difference=.127). Students from both universities had broadly similar responses, with one evaluated slightly higher than the other.

	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Component 4	Component 5	Satisfaction rating
Component 1		.565**	-.648**	.837**	.635**	.718**
Component 2	.565**		-.372**	.569**	.431**	.505**
Component 3	-.648**	-.372**		-.657**	-.512**	-.656**
Component 4	.837**	.569**	-.657**		.673**	.799**
Component 5	.635**	.431**	-.512**	.673**		.708**
Satisfaction rating	.718**	.505**	-.656**	.799**	.708**	
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level						

Discussion: naming the components

Following statistical analysis, naming each component requires a shift to interpretation and seeking a narrative. Readers are therefore invited to give their own names to these components or disagree with the labels used here, but at the very least it seems very convincing that none of these components have 'satisfaction' as an underlying explanation. Student satisfaction ratings therefore do not emerge naturally from analysis: the concept of student satisfaction is an artificial one, imposed on the data. At the same time, correlation with this forced component suggests that satisfaction has a strong relationship with the other components and is suggesting that component two will have a negative tone in its narrative.

This is the proxy and nuance mentioned in the title of this paper: each of the five components offers greater insight into students' experiences of feedback than satisfaction does, but satisfaction ratings are nevertheless an excellent proxy measure of how well each of the five components is experienced. This is a useful finding as it suggests an explanation for unsuccessful attempts to improve satisfaction ratings by addressing those issues directly.

Before discussing each component in turn, it is also worth highlighting that students' year of study made no significant difference to their rating on any component. This could suggest either than students' opinions change very little throughout their four year course, or that the quality of feedback is randomly distributed throughout their training. Either way this is rather discouraging,

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since it suggests students do not really improve in how they use feedback, which may in turn suggest a high level of dependence on their tutor.

The names assigned to each component are included in the updated correlations table below, and are now discussed individually.

	1. Learning-focused feedback	2. Importance of consistent hard work	3. Tutor-dominated experience	4. Feedback focused on the student's overall best interests	5. Self-reliance	Satisfaction rating
1. Learning-focused feedback		.565**	-.648**	.837**	.635**	.718**
2. Importance of consistent hard work	.565**		-.372**	.569**	.431**	.505**
3. Tutor-dominated experience	-.648**	-.372**		-.657**	-.512**	-.656**
4. Feedback focused on the student's overall best interests	.837**	.569**	-.657**		.673**	.799**
5. Self-reliance	.635**	.431**	-.512**	.673**		.708**
Satisfaction rating	.718**	.505**	-.656**	.799**	.708**	
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level						

The first component was named 'feedback with a learning focus'. This included agreement with statements that feedback was tailored to the student as an individual learner, helped to guide (and was used for) general improvements, and helped the student to meet their own goals. This component indicated feedback with constructivist principles, but also correlated very strongly with more concrete ideas of good quality feedback such as timeliness (.7, p<.01) and matching assessment criteria (.705, p<.01). This suggests that, despite my earlier criticism of these as over-simplified measures in the literature review, timeliness and matching assessment criteria may actually be a good method of quickly and cheaply evaluating feedback.

Responses to this component covered the full possible range of scores, indicating extremes of experience where some students had feedback they perceived as entirely focused on learning whilst others had the exact opposite experience. The majority of responses, however, showed strong agreement with this component, indicating largely learning-focused feedback with the second-highest mean (4.08) of any of the components. The component showed a very strong correlation with feedback which has the student's overall best interest at heart (.837, p<.01), self-reliance (.635, p<.01) and consistent hard work (.565, p<.01). There was also a very strong negative correlation with a tutor-dominated experience (-.648, p<.01). Students reporting a feedback experience which

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seemed primarily focused on their learning were therefore more likely to also report that the feedback had their best interests at heart, the feedback was acted upon, and they were far less likely to divert effort into particular tasks or feel that they were overly focused on what their tutor wanted.

The component 'importance of consistent hard work' was decided on as a label for agreeing with items such as making a good job of every task, students behaving the same whether or not they were being assessed, and paying careful attention to feedback, particularly when preparing for future lessons. There was also a suggestion in the component analysis that this would include rejecting strategic behaviours, such as saving special activities for observed lessons or making sure one was seen to be paying close attention to feedback. Consistent hard work showed a strong correlation with feedback with a learning focus (.565, $p<.01$), feedback which has the student's overall best interests at heart (.569, $p<.01$), and a moderate negative correlation with tutor-dominated experiences (-.372, $p<.01$). There was also a moderate-to-strong positive correlation with self-reliance (.431, $p<.01$). Taken together, these relationships suggest that students working consistently hard is associated with feedback which students find helpful, both in terms of their learning and meeting the demands of assessments. Whilst this is of course just students' perceptions of what helps them to work consistently rather than strategically, the accompanying high mean (4.24, the highest of any component) suggests that students typically see themselves as consistently working hard anyway.

The only component with a negative tone in its narrative was a tutor-dominated experience. This component included responses which indicated that the student's contributions were not welcomed, feedback was not tailored to the student as a learner, feedback did not give clear priorities, feedback being influenced by personal factors, it not being appropriate to question decisions and feedback being used to reinforce the status of the tutor. Whilst some responses might indicate a tutor taking control as a pragmatic approach, this component generally describes a negative experience in terms of the student's learning as it is anti-dialogue, so it is reassuring to see that it has the lowest mean (2.29), indicating that this is not a common description of most students' experiences. However, there are several cases of students giving full scores on this component, and a standard deviation of .648 indicates that the experience is quite mixed. The component also negatively correlates with the other four components, which are all positive elements of the experience. This suggests that negative aspects of the experience cluster together and have a similar underlying cause, which is related to the tutor being seen to dominate feedback. There is not enough evidence to state causation here: a tutor may well take charge to pre-empt difficulties, or a domineering tutor may cause difficulties.

Despite broad agreement with a fairly high mean of 3.81, the component 'feedback with the student's overall best interests at heart' was the most varied component with standard deviation of .714 and responses using the full possible range of scores, indicating some students who felt that their experience was entirely serving their best interests whilst others felt the complete opposite. This component included items related to the professional context of learning to do the 'job' of teaching. As this sample was taken from students on teacher training courses, some items related to the helping to find faults in their teaching and improving lessons for their learners. Other items related to practical issues like helping to give clear evidence for skills portfolios, and feedback being easily usable by being timely and objective.

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The idea of feedback having the student's best interests at heart was therefore intended to be distinct from learning-focused feedback (component 1) as it was not restricted to being useful for developing the student but was seen to have a general utility, including helping with the mechanics of how teachers are assessed such as managing their evidence file or offering quick practical tips.

The final component, 'self-reliance', was the most difficult to name. Since it used only two significant loading items, it was tempting to reject entirely. However, it seemed to add an important component of the experience as students came to trust their own judgements, an important feature of sustainable feedback practices. This was fairly highly reported, with a mean of 3.78. The range of scores also indicated some cases of extremely self-reliant students, but no cases where students were completely dependent. The standard deviation was also one of the highest at .663, indicating a broad range of responses but a strong overall agreement that this was a significant feature of feedback. Similarly, self-reliance is commonly experienced with a mean of 3.78 and is also associated with other positive components and negatively related to tutor-centric feedback.

Having named the five components, it was important to try find an overall narrative for each component and how this related to the starting point of a simple satisfaction rating. A positive experience of feedback seems to have the following traits: learning is the main focus of feedback, students' consistent hard work is encouraged, tutors do not seek to dominate the experience, students' overall needs as professional students are considered, and students develop confidence in their own judgement. With the exception of consistent hard work, each of these components has a very strong correlation with the simple measure of student satisfaction. This reinforces the specific value of this simple measure: it is a convenient, quick measure using as few as three question items and indicates broadly how well feedback promotes various aspects of learning.

Evaluation and conclusions

This paper started from the premise that the complexity of how feedback is understood in the academic literature was at odds with how simply students seemed to understand feedback or how tutors were advised to improve their feedback. If true, attempting to improve feedback by giving students what they want would be counter-productive, since feedback is too complex a concept to be reduced to such simple measures as promptness or level of detail. Creating a survey just asking about feedback offered the students in this study the chance to show a more complex or nuanced understanding of feedback and what makes the difference between feedback they find helpful and feedback which they do not. The components created through principal component analysis suggested that five features of the feedback experience relate closely to each other. This relationship suggested that the feedback which students saw as most usable and which discouraged them from strategic approaches to assessment was feedback which either had their best overall interests as developing professional at heart or was focused on their long-term learning goals. There was also a strong negative relationship with tutor-dominated experiences, indicating that poor feedback will typically be dominated by the tutor. This helps to support the argument for more sustainable feedback practices, rejecting the idea that feedback is a simple transmission of knowledge from expert to student. As a result, it is very unlikely that students who use feedback poorly will benefit from their tutor taking the lead: this may well make things worse.

These conclusions are encouraging in that students seem to have the ability to see the benefits of feedback which is learning-oriented, so might benefit from being trusted more to engage in dialogue. There is a strong argument for encouraging students to take a more pro-active approach, reducing some of the power differences between tutors and students. In terms of evaluating and

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improving feedback provision, the components derived in this study suggest that the promptness or level of detail is of far less concern than the simple question of who is leading the feedback and for what purpose.

This research was also timely for teacher education in the UK, as provision is shifting from being university-led to being school-led. In terms of student identity, this paper might therefore be one of the last chances to evaluate how feedback is conceptualised by students who primarily belong to a university which places them in a school, as compared with students who will belong to a school. There is a strong sense in this study of a need for genuineness in feedback, emphasising the importance of truly nurturing and caring relationships between tutors and students. These relationships may come under pressure as students spend much longer in the same school, or they might develop even stronger relationships: either way, it will be important to monitor these new arrangements closely and guard against tutors dominating the student experience. It is encouraging that the data collection method did not influence responses to the survey, so even though students will be more difficult to reach in person under the new system there is no reason to suggest that their responses to emailed surveys will be any less valid than in-person completion of paper surveys.

Encouragement can be taken from the finding that feedback is described very positively in a pleasingly high number of cases, giving encouragement to trying to adapt some features of the teacher training model to other areas of higher education. In particular, having a main tutor who is aware of and cares about students' overall development seems crucial. Negative experiences were typically associated with the student feeling powerless when interacting with their tutor, in extreme cases this being related to a tutor being ego-centric or simply too busy to see the student as a learner. This need not necessarily be seen as critical of those tutors since they might understandably see their first duty as to the children in their care. In terms of student development, however, such behaviours are detrimental across all measures: even when a mentor takes control with good intentions, student learning will suffer significantly. Adopting a similar model of one-on-one mentoring would therefore require careful selection of tutors and ensuring that they had enough time and resources to engage meaningfully with their learners.

Finally, in terms of better surveying student satisfaction, I have suggested that survey methods are limited in the extent to which they can pick up on the nuances of how students experience feedback. However, surveys are likely to remain the most common method for evaluating the feedback experience. I have suggested that new survey items might better capture the most important points by looking more generally at whether or not students feel that feedback is serving their best interests. Nevertheless, despite its critics, the National Student Survey items seem to provide a decent proxy for the components in this study. If researchers and policy makers see these for what they are - quick, cheap proxies for the experience - then they are fairly robust methods for evaluating feedback provision. Relying on such items will only cause a problem if the outcome becomes a measure and attention is put on over-simplified improvements, but this seems to be exactly what is happening. Whilst this study has not found any methodological justification for stopping use of survey items related to promptness or detail of feedback, the way such items can be deliberately targeted suggests that they can only be useful for a limited time, while there is far less scope for abuse in broader items such as asking students if their feedback was learning focused or had their best interests at heart. Such questions also have the benefit of having a narrative behind them which is meaningful to students, helping tutors to think about what really matters in feedback rather than simply what is measured.

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