

# Using technology to help students engage with their feedback



## A ten minute guide for senior managers

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**Technology, Feedback, Action!: The impact of learning  
technology upon students' engagement with their  
feedback**

An Enhancing Learning Through Technology Research  
Project funded by the Higher Education Academy

Also available:

- A best practice guide for academic staff
- A student guide to using feedback
- Technology, Feedback Action! A Short Report

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## About this guide

This guide is based on the outcomes of a research project funded by the Higher Education Academy and undertaken at Sheffield Hallam University during 2008/09.

Technology, Feedback, Action! evaluated how a range of technical interventions might encourage students to engage with their feedback and formulate actions to improve future learning, including

- online publication of feedback and grades through the Blackboard Grade Centre
- adaptive release of grades through a bespoke Assignment Handler within Blackboard
- linking feedback to assessment criteria via an in-house developed electronic Feedback Wizard

The project worked in partnership with 23 undergraduate students to explore their experiences of receiving feedback with varying degrees of technical intervention.

Best practice recommendations for the use of technology to help students engage with their feedback have been identified from the research. The recommendations should be considered within the context of an institution where e-learning is characterised as a mainstream feature of the student experience.

This ten-minute guide for senior managers provides a framework to **challenge existing feedback practices and processes**, a summary of which is provided opposite. Complementary guides are available for students and for academic staff.

The full research report for the project can be read at <http://tinyurl.com/tfaproject>

## Best practice for implementation

To embed **online publication of feedback and grades** into learning and teaching

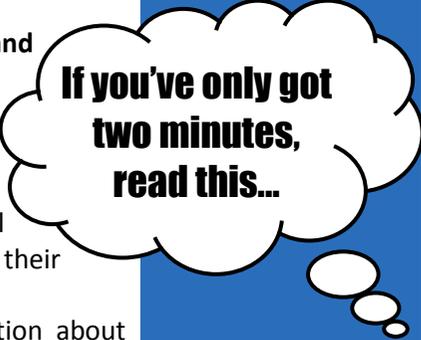
- promote the use of appropriate tools within your VLE as the primary method for delivering feedback and grades
- ensure systems allow students to access all feedback delivered online for the duration of their study
- ensure staff provide students with information about the format of feedback and the date it will be available
- ensure that student satisfaction with prompt return of feedback is not negated by its return immediately prior to weekends or university holidays

To maximise the benefits of **adaptive release of grades** in teaching and learning

- promote the educational benefits of feedback for learning rather than grades for administration
- produce guidance for staff highlighting the factors that impact upon the success of adaptive release of grades
- produce guidance for students on the importance of reflecting in the context of assessment
- promote assessment design that encourages students to consider previous feedback in their future work
- programme design should build-in opportunities that allow feedback to feed forward between modules

To make the most effective use of **feedback linked to assessment criteria** in teaching and learning

- promote a model that presents feedback in the context of student work and supplementary feedback grids
- promote the publishing of assessment criteria as part of the assessment brief
- promote a culture of self-assessment where students informally assess their work against published criteria



**If you've only got  
two minutes,  
read this...**

### What our students said...

*'You don't have to share it with everyone whereas if you are in a seminar and everyone's talking about what they got you kind of have to feel the pressure to join in whereas if you get it on Blackboard you can see it at your own leisure.'*

*'It obviously makes it a lot more beneficial to me as a student to receive [feedback] in a much more legible form...typed feedback is much better than written feedback, because you can read it. Lecturers have a tendency to scrawl.'*

## Findings from the research

The main findings from the Technology, Feedback, Action! research project are presented below. The study demonstrated significant learning and logistical benefits in all the interventions explored.

### Online publication of grades and feedback

- feedback stored electronically for **future reference** augmented by the opportunity for, and expectation of, **further dialogue** provides the greatest benefit to future learning
- **pushes** feedback to students removing the burden to seek out feedback from tutors
- allows **control** over how, when and where feedback is received
- enables students to read and respond to feedback when they are **emotionally ready** and in privacy
- facilitates prompt return of feedback making it more current and **meaningful** in terms of the original assessment
- when stored alongside the rest of their learning, students are more likely to **revisit** feedback when completing future assessments
- students can **monitor** progression and see how performance on each assessment task builds to an overall profile for the module
- perceived personalisation, thoughtfulness and **legibility** of typed feedback

### Adaptive release of grades

- students acknowledge the **learning benefits** of adaptive release when they fully understand the purpose, otherwise the process can be perceived as extra work
- students like to receive their feedback and grade in close **proximity**
- students do produce action plans from their feedback but this is a subconscious process and adaptive release provides a space for them to **formalise** this process
- emphasises the importance of **reflection** to students
- enhances **student engagement** with their feedback

### Linking feedback to assessment criteria

- feedback grids are most effective when supplementary to **'in context'** feedback (annotated comments within the student's original assessment)
- enables students to identify strengths and weaknesses in a **cohesive** and legible way
- students use assessment criteria to identify **learning targets**
- offers a level of **transparency** of how overall assessment grade is calculated

#### What our students said...

*'If I have to reflect on the feedback before receiving the grade then it sticks in my mind a bit longer, the feedback I receive, the points that I'm going to use and it's a little bit easier to remember when I'm working on my next assignment.'*

*'You could really clearly see what you had to do for the next [assessment] and where you could actually improve.'*

**What our  
students said...**

*'You can check grades  
as and when you  
want rather than  
when it suits the  
university, when it fits  
around your  
timetable.'*

*'It keeps grades all in  
one place. It means  
you can see how  
you're progressing  
throughout the course  
of the year.'*

## **Challenging practice**

Technology, Feedback, Action! identified a series of considerations around the technical interventions explored. Each consideration presented below is designed to challenge existing practice and promote a consistent approach across programmes of study when embedding technology or other intervention into the process of feedback.

### **Online publication of grades and feedback**

This study confirmed the value to students of publishing feedback and grades online alongside other learning materials. Consider promoting and supporting the use of appropriate tools within your VLE (e.g. Blackboard Grade Centre) as the primary method for delivering feedback for all students in a consistent way across all programmes.

Students perceived that publishing feedback online gives it a permanence, and expect to be able to return to it when preparing future assessments. Ensure systems are in place to enable students can access all feedback delivered online for the duration of their study.

Students highlighted their frustrations when it was unclear how or when feedback would be provided. To reduce student anxiety ensure staff provide students with information about when feedback will be available and the format it will be delivered or presented in.

In the development of any policies or guidelines regarding the return of feedback and grades it is recommended that due consideration is given to timing. Whilst promptness remains important, it should also reflect the negative impact upon student satisfaction of making feedback and grades available immediately prior to a weekend or holiday.

### Adaptive release of grades

This study found that feedback before grades has real learning benefits and that the reverse is also true (i.e. giving grades before feedback diminishes opportunities for learning benefits). Consider promoting the benefits of this approach to staff, shifting the emphasis from the importance of grades for administration to feedback for learning.

Adaptive release shifts the boundaries of the assessment process, and that full benefit of the approach can only be achieved when reflecting on feedback is identified as a key step in the process right from the start. Clear guidance highlighting key factors that impact upon the success of adaptive release is necessary for staff wishing to adopt this approach.

Adaptive release provides space for students to engage with and understand their feedback, and to formalise their own action planning. To maximise the benefit of this it is recommended that clear guidance is given to students regarding the process of reflection in the context of assessment.

The opportunity for feed forward is not intuitive. Consider building in opportunities during programme and module design that allow for feedback to feed-forward to future modules. Similarly, consider promoting assessment design that enables and encourages students to consider previous feedback in the context of their next assessment to get the most benefit from it.

#### What our students said...

*'It makes you think about your feedback because it's very easy just to read feedback and think 'oh, I did alright' or 'oh, that's not so good' but if it actually makes you think about it and you have to write about it because that's how you're going to get your grade then I think that's good for yourself.'*

*'If it was in every module and it had been like that from the start since I'd come to university then it would just seem the norm and it would be fine to do, but introducing it at the moment would maybe not.'*

**What our  
students said...**

*'It was quite good, a lot more detail than you usually get and it was structured as well, it wasn't just the teacher rambling on about your assignment.'*

*'It's quite difficult to use your feedback because...we've got five assignments and they're all totally different from each other.'*

**Linking feedback to assessment criteria**

This study found that students value and engage with feedback that has been presented legibly in the context of their original work. Feedback linked to assessment criteria was effective in enabling students to identify strengths and weaknesses at a glance. Consider promoting the benefits of using a mixed model of 'in context' feedback and supplementary feedback grids linked to assessment criteria as providing the most comprehensive feedback.

**Module, course and assessment design**

A further finding from this study indicated that opportunities for feed-forward, particularly between modules, is not intuitive. Consider building in opportunities in module and course design that allow for feedback to feed forward within and between modules. Similarly, consider promoting assessment design that enables and encourages students to consider previous feedback in the context of their next assessment to get the most benefit from it

## About the authors

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**Graham Holden** is the Head of Academic Practice and his responsibilities include supporting professional development for academic staff at Sheffield Hallam University, promoting different approaches to curriculum design and developing the role of assessment and feedback in supporting student learning.

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