


FEEDBACK



A student guide to using feedback

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

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**Why am I reading
this?**

This isn't just another study guide written by academic staff who can't remember what it was like to be a student.

I'm a full time student at Sheffield Hallam University, in my third year of an Events Management degree.

I've been asked to write this booklet by a group of staff at Sheffield Hallam who carried out a research project to find out how students use feedback and how a range of online tools might help them to use feedback more effectively.

The project was called **Technology, Feedback, Action!** and involved interviewing 23 undergraduate students from across Sheffield Hallam University's four faculties. This guide contains the relevant findings from the research and is intended to help you make the most of all the feedback you receive at university.

Claire Burn



Why do you get feedback?

Everyone gets feedback at university. Some of it is praise, some is criticism, but all of it is useful.

Feedback can help you to identify your own strengths and weaknesses. You can build on positive feedback and address critical feedback in your future work and behaviour. Try to think of each piece of feedback you get as a signpost pointing you in the right direction. Using feedback from one assessment to help you in the future is known as **'feeding forward'** (page 4).

What should I do with feedback?

Once you have received your feedback, try to identify the main points and think about what your tutor actually means. Some people find that writing things down or talking to someone helps to clarify things. Doing this might help you think of ways you can improve in future.

You may find keeping all of your feedback in one place helps as it makes it easier to look back and identify common mistakes. If you know which areas you need to improve on, you can plan how you will address these areas.

One student we spoke to consistently received critical feedback about her referencing skills. Once she realised this was an area she needed to address, she bought a referencing guide and practiced until she got it right. Something like this might only make a small difference to the grades you receive in future but it could be the difference between one degree classification and another.

What our students said...

'It is all really good, valuable stuff and if you don't use it then you're currently doing yourself an injustice really.'

'You can look back on what you've been doing, you can reflect on how you're going to improve, which is obviously why we're all here, so it makes it clearer and you can see exactly what's going on. You can set yourself targets.'

**What our
students said...**

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

Feeding forward

Feeding forward: using feedback from one assessment to help you when completing a future assessment.

It is easy to understand how a tutor's feedback comment about spelling or referencing might be used to feed forward to your next assessment.

However, some of the students we interviewed said they found it difficult to use feedback comments to feed forward when the feedback given was very specific to a particular assessment.

This can sometimes make it difficult to identify elements of the feedback that are transferable to other assessments. Content or subject-specific feedback comments can be used to help you with your future work, they just need a little more de-coding.

If your tutor gives you feedback which is specific to a particular subject or assessment, think about why they have made that comment and how you might use it to improve your future work.

For example, a tutor might comment on an assessment where you hadn't understood what you had been required to do. Although you will not be able to change the grade you received for that assessment, in future it is important to ensure you clearly read and understand the assessment brief.

You could read some study books to find out the exact definitions of words and phrases like 'discuss' and 'critically analyse'. Or you could book an appointment with your tutor and ask them to explain what you are being asked to do.

Activity

When was the last time you were given a piece of feedback? Who gave you the feedback and what was it about? How could you use that feedback to help you feed forward to a different assessment or situation?



Think...

What are the **main points** in this feedback?

What things attracted **positive** feedback?

What things attracted **negative** feedback?

How can I use this feedback in a **future** assessment?

Any other thoughts?

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.'

'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 in on Blackboard you can see it at your own leisure.'

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

Why are my grades and feedback published online?

Many universities use a **Virtual Learning Environment** (more often referred to as a **VLE**) to keep programme and module information and learning resources together in a single place. Publishing feedback and grades online through the VLE keeps them close to learning materials. This makes it easier to refer back to and use learning materials to help reflect on the feedback you receive.

Where your tutors have chosen to publish your feedback and grades online, you may find the following benefits

- you don't have to be on campus to **access** your grades and feedback
- you can view your feedback and grades in **privacy**. There is less pressure to share it with others in class
- your feedback is **stored** in one place. You can find it again more easily
- typed feedback comments are often more **legible** and easier to read than those written by hand
- for **group assessments** each group member will receive their own copy of the feedback
- you can keep track of your **progress** as you complete each assessment task and see how each task builds to an overall profile for the module

If your feedback and grades are not currently published online for your assessments, you may be able to negotiate the possibility of this with your tutors.

What is a Virtual Learning Environment?

A Virtual Learning Environment is an online environment, a bit like a website. The information available on a VLE will depend on where and what you are study. It could include information about your programme of study and the modules you are taking, materials and links to library resources to support your learning, personal and group timetables, ways to manage your student record, and help about all aspects of being a student enrolled at your institution.

At Sheffield Hallam University we use Blackboard but it is better known by students and staff as **shuspace**. Your university might use something different and it might be called a student portal, Student Gateway or Personal Learning Environment.

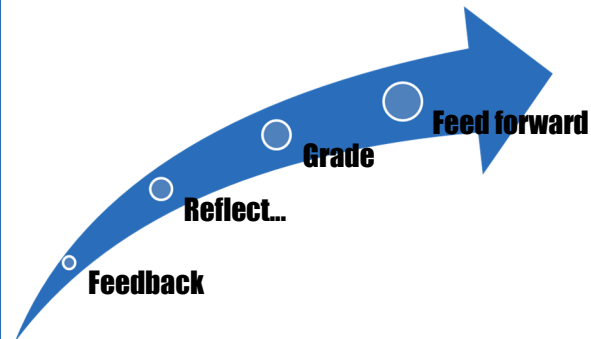
What our students said...

'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.'

Separating feedback from the grade

Your tutor may return your work with only feedback comments and not the grade. There are different ways your tutor may do this

- you get an email or notification saying that feedback is available online. You follow the link to the feedback and read it. You are then asked to reflect on the feedback you have received. Once you have submitted your reflection, your grade is immediately released to you
- work is returned with feedback during a seminar. Your tutor then encourages you to think about the feedback you have received and possibly talk to your peers about it. The tutor gives you the grade for that piece of work at the end of the seminar
- you collect your feedback and are required to book an appointment with your tutor to discuss your feedback and receive your grade



When we interviewed students for this project, we talked about a technique available to staff at Sheffield Hallam University which required students to comment on their feedback electronically before receiving their grade.

What is the point in separating the feedback from my grades?

At the moment, many tutors claim feedback doesn't work. They think that students don't act on their feedback and that they are only concerned with their grade.

Sometimes I have skim-read feedback comments just to see that all-important grade. Some of the students we spoke to said they did the same as they were anxious to find out what their grade was.

However, this can mean that sometimes we don't pay enough attention to the feedback and miss out on the opportunity to identify where we can improve and do something about it.

Getting feedback before your grades encourages you to read the feedback properly and think about what the tutor has said instead of just looking at the grade. Some of the students we spoke to found this helped them to remember what their tutor had said. They were then able to use the feedback when completing their next assessment.

How would you feel about receiving your feedback before your grade? Have you experienced this process? What actions did you take?

What our students said...

'You're just eager to get that final mark so you can relax.'

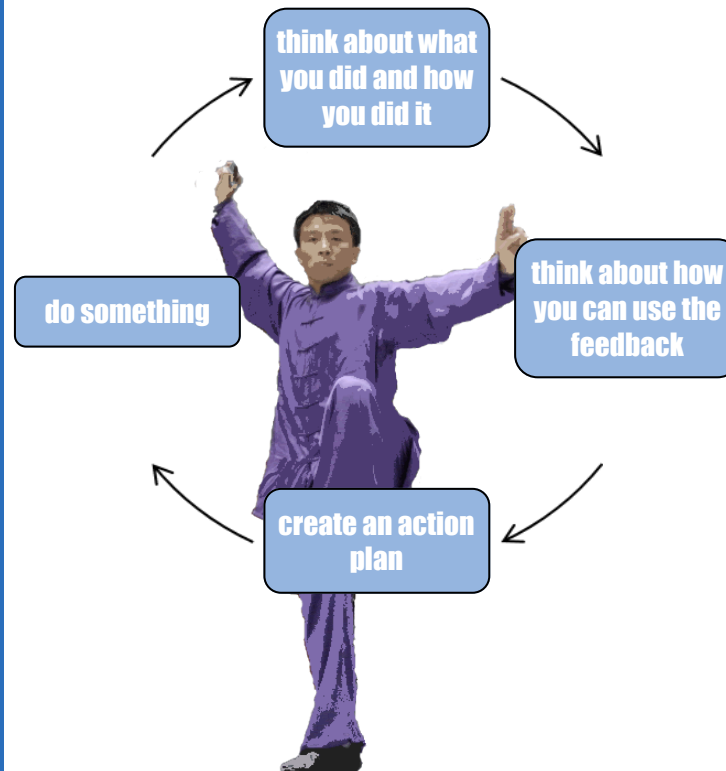
'If I have to reflect on the feedback before receiving the grade then it sticks in my mind a bit longer, the feedback I receive, the points that I'm going to use and it's a little bit easier to remember when I'm working on my next assignment.'

Think...

Reflection

Reflection means thinking about something you have done or experienced, making sense of it, and informing how you can improve or do things differently in future.

The diagram below, based on Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), shows how reflecting on something you have done or experienced can help you in the future.



Kolb, D.A. (1984)
Experiential learning:
experience as the
source of learning and
development. NJ:
Prentice-Hall

There are various situations you could apply Kolb's learning cycle to, a telephone call, a conversation with a tutor, an assessment or task you are asked to complete during your work placement.



**Five reasons to reflect
on your feedback**

1. Reflecting can improve your performance on your future assessments by helping you identify what you did well and where you can improve

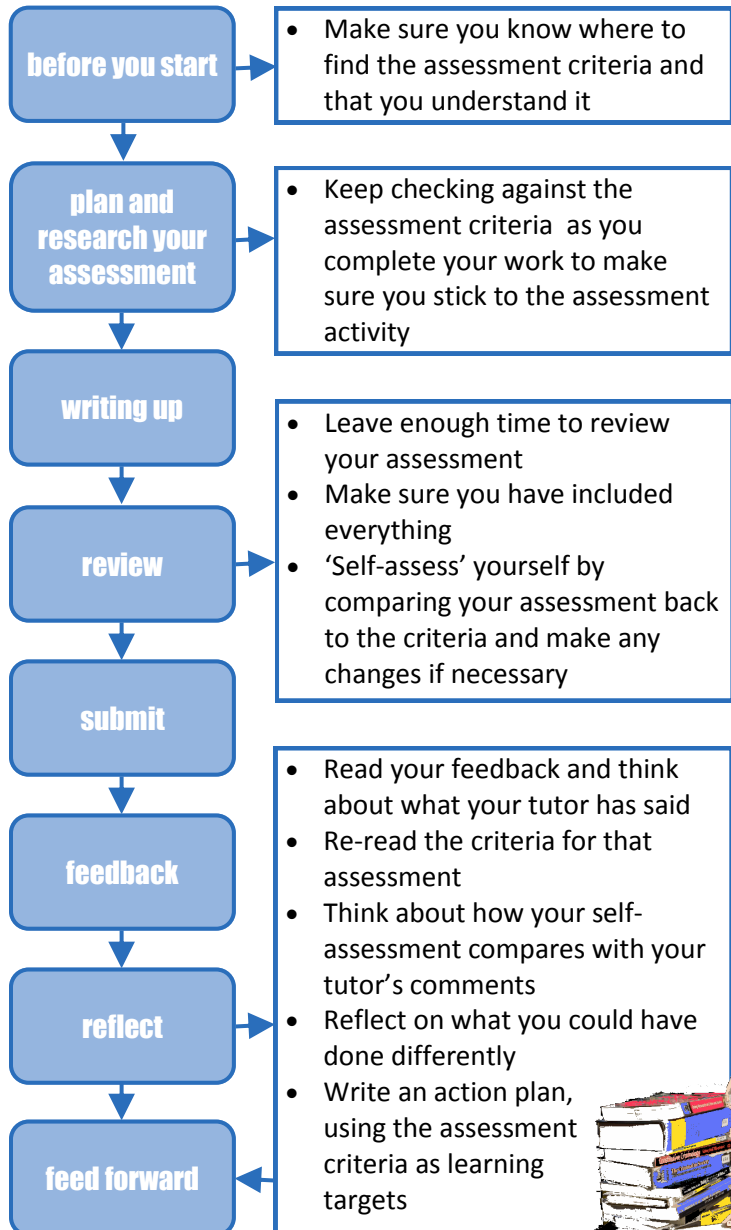
2. Reflecting is not just important while at university, it is a useful skill to develop and it can help you throughout your future career

3. Without reflection, you keep doing things in same way and never improve

4. Reflection helps you to understand concepts and principals (sometimes called 'deep learning') instead of just knowing the facts (sometimes called 'surface learning'). Demonstrating an understanding of concepts and principals gained through reflection, will help you to achieve better grades in your assessments

5. Some experts suggest that if we practice reflecting after an experience, we can learn how to reflect during an experience - 'thinking on your feet'

Assessment timeline



If you do this...

'I don't tend to write action plans down. I tend to retain things in my memory and then if I need to look something up I can usually remember where it is.'

'I don't write it down, I just know in my head what I have to do next time and try to put it into practice.'

'I try to think that I do that subconsciously anyway if I'm doing something and I've done it wrong, I like to think that I'll do it better next time.'

Action planning

Many of the students we spoke to didn't make any formal action plans based on their feedback, preferring to make a mental note of the points raised which they try to remember when completing future assessments

This isn't the best way of reflecting on your feedback. Making an action plan, even if it just a very simple one can be really useful in helping you to think about how you can improve when completing future assessments.

...try this

Action plans don't have to be really formal. It could just be like a checklist of things you can do to improve your next assessment based on feedback you have received previously. You may just find that writing down your thoughts or talking to someone about your feedback helps.

The next page shows a sample template for writing an action plan. You may find another method of writing an action plan which works better for you.

Additional sample templates for your use can be downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/tfaproject>

Action plan

Module/unit of study		
Assessment title		
Main points made by tutor	Positive or critical?	
1.		
2.		
3.		
Grade awarded for this assessment		
How I will build on positive feedback		
How I will address critical feedback		
Things to do	By when?	
1.		
2.		
3.		

Portfolios

What is a portfolio?

A portfolio is a collection of related things - these can be documents, media, and snippets, often with captions or descriptions which explain the relevance of items.

Portfolios may be very formal and professional, or can be quite personal and informal, depending on your preference and what you've been asked for.

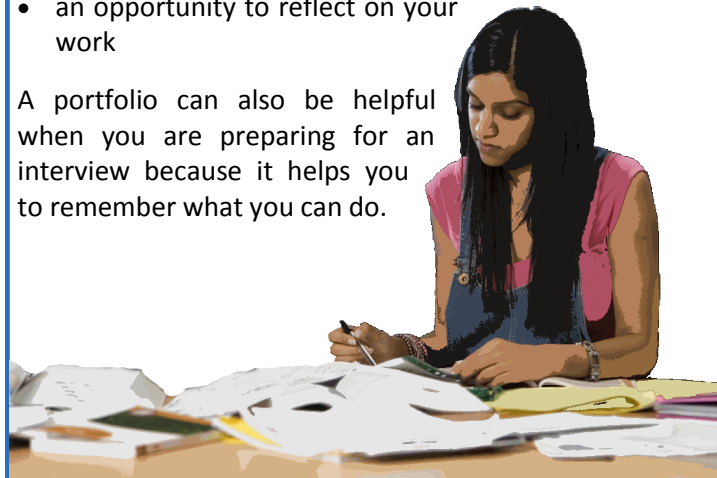
You can keep more than one, and you can often decide who you want to share it with. Sharing a portfolio with others is a good way to obtain useful further feedback.

Why should I keep a portfolio?

Although keeping a portfolio may seem like a lot of extra work, there are many advantages, including

- reminding you about the good quality of your work
- renewing your sense of self-esteem
- an opportunity to reflect on your work

A portfolio can also be helpful when you are preparing for an interview because it helps you to remember what you can do.



Types of portfolio

- **Portfolios for assessment**

You might be asked to create a portfolio as part of your course, and according to set assessment criteria. It could include evaluations, reports, photos and reflections on work you have completed.

You may receive feedback directly in the portfolio, or could add it yourself after the assessment.

- **Portfolios for personal development**

You can use a portfolio to bring together anything relating to your personal development. It can include experiences from outside your course, reflections on your skills and approaches to learning, and plans for your future.

This is a good place to consider how to respond to feedback you've received.

- **Portfolios for presentation**

A portfolio for presentation can be used to introduce yourself when applying for a university place, a qualification, employment, professional promotion, or potential clients. Presentation portfolios typically include a personal statement and a selection of best work, with appropriate captions or descriptions.

Including any positive feedback you've received can help to demonstrate your skills to others.

