An investigation into the reasons why students do not collect marked assignments and the accompanying feedback

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Background and rationale

The major role played by assessment and feedback in any programme cannot be underestimated. It is through the process of assessment design that course/module learning outcomes are met and as a consequence student learning may be measured. Alongside the importance of assessment runs the value and effectiveness of feedback. In this study feedback is defined as *commentaries made in respect of written assignment work*.

Rowntree's (1987) seminal text about assessment provides a dramatic, yet highly pertinent claim that feedback " is the life blood of learning". The importance of assessment and feedback as a research focus continues to dominate the thinking behind designing appropriate and effective solutions to measure and support learning (Higgins, 2001; Mutch, 2003; Black and Wiliam, 2003; Rust et al 2003).

So, why is it that some students do not collect assignment work and therefore cannot benefit from this supposed 'transfusion' for learning? Anecdotal evidence from within the School of Education would suggest that there is a small, but persistent, percentage of uncollected assignment work every year. The authors believed that such stories and figures would probably be mirrored within the School of Education and would be echoed across the University. This potential problem prompted the study to find out the extent of the actual problem.

The issue of uncollected work and feedback may have consequences for student learning because students are unable to capitalise on any feedback or commentary provided by the tutor. In addition, the issue has particular implications for tutorial time, in terms of time spent writing feedback. This can be frustrating for tutors, who may have taken a great deal of time and thought in providing feedback, which is likely to be tailored to the individual needs of that particular student.

The literature discussed with the findings tends to focus on the somewhat narrower dimensions of assessment and feedback, circumventing the larger picture of assessment processes within the wider arena of Higher Education. The report accepts as a given that within the University of Wolverhampton the outcomes based curriculum model is the prevalent design approach, and that alternative curriculum models may be used in other H. E. Institutions.

The authors are cognisant that the lack of discussion around the possible influences of current curriculum models influencing H.E. programmes and modules, and consequently their impact on and for assessment and feedback, may pose a significant deficit in the scope of the background reading and discussion.

However, as with any curriculum model, the process stands or falls on all the component parts working in synchronisation. If students are not involved or engaged in curriculum design and operation, including assessment processes, a few may feel disenfranchised. This may be a key reason why students neglect to collect assignment work.

The research

The focus on non-collection of assignment feedback led to the consideration of both tutors and students as potential foci for this study. The aims of the research were to find out:

1.   The extent to which assignment work is not collected;

2.   The reasons why students do not collect their work and feedback;

3.   Actions which would increase the proportion of work and feedback collected by students

In the choice of research methods an attempt was made to draw on both qualitative and quantitative approaches, in the hope of capitalising on the strengths of each paradigm. Therefore, two key methods were used:

> ➢ A questionnaire to investigate teaching staff perceptions

> ➢ A focus group to ascertain perceptions around these key questions: -

> • How can feedback on assignments be improved?

> • How can feedback 'procedures' and 'processes' be improved?

> • How can tutors ensure students collect assignments and benefit from the feedback?

Initially, the methodology centred on determining tutor views and comments about non-collection of feedback. A questionnaire was designed using a range of question types – cued, closed and open (Cohen *et al*, 2000). Reflecting on the potential labour intensive nature of analysing large numbers of returned questionnaires, the chosen tutor groups were selected from the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure and the School of Education; two schools on the same campus.

However, an opportunity emerged to use an electronic based questionnaire, which allowed greater freedom to survey opinions on a wider scale, and to access academic staff university wide. This was not without pitfalls and the questionnaire had to be re-launched to obtain a return of 87 out of a potential of 737, i.e.11.8%. This is interesting in itself, and any would-be researchers should be mindful of the apparent reluctance of some staff to complete an electronic questionnaire.

The focus group used a small group of 8 students who were known to be non-collectors of assignment work. This posed the dilemma of how they could be enticed to participate without being made to feel they were being 'made an example of', and the possible backlash resulting in biased results. Care was taken to avoid any accusatory approach to the group. In fact, no mention was made of the reason for them being selected for the study. However, this meant that the focus of questions had to be widened a little to try to ascertain thoughts about 'feedback' in general. (Contact the authors for background information, questions and ideas provided for the group to discuss.)

The chosen approaches incorporated notions of reliability and validity through selection of suitable target groupings and through direct coverage of pertinent and relevant questions. This is not to say that the design features are infallible, or even adequate. As indicated, there are emerging problems with the particular design features used e.g. the benefits of using a questionnaire which helps the researcher with analysing the results, may not appeal to some potential respondents, thus diminishing the potential quantities of data. In addition, the focus group used was very small, and the questions used were rather broad. Nevertheless, the results obtained still have important things to say about feedback processes within the university.
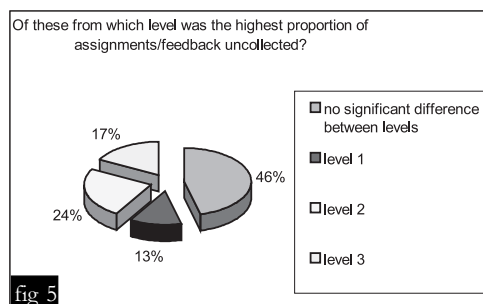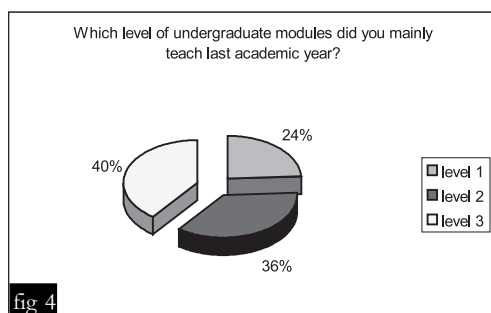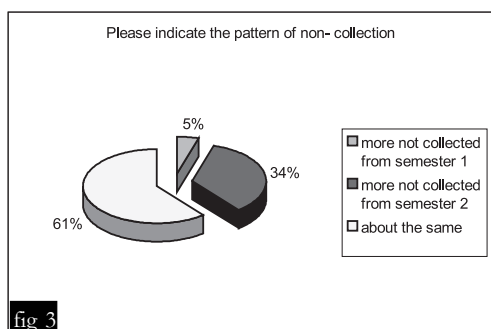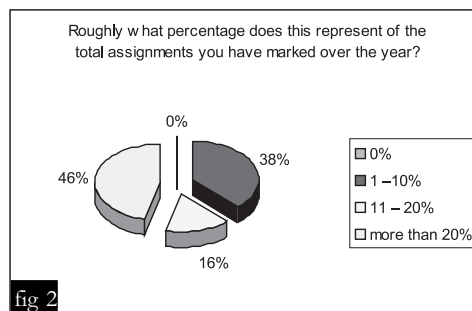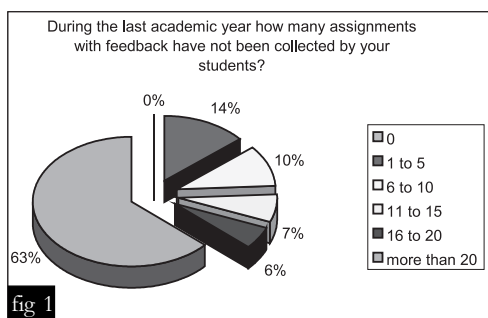
The outcomes

The data presented here focuses on a selection of findings from questionnaire and focus group results, which were considered together. Verbatim statements are italicised.

**The extent to which assignment work is not collected:**

All of the tutors who responded have assessed work that has remained uncollected (possibly a reason why they have responded)

See Figures 1-5

Figure 1: During the last academic year how many assignments with feedback have not been collected by your students? 0%, 14%, 10%, 7%, 6%, 63% — 0, 1 to 5, 6 to 10, 11 to 15, 16 to 20, more than 20

Figure 2: Roughly what percentage does this represent of the total assignments you have marked over the year? 0%, 38%, 16%, 46% — 0%, 1–10%, 11–20%, more than 20%

Figure 3: Please indicate the pattern of non-collection. 5%, 34%, 61% — more not collected from semester 1, more not collected from semester 2, about the same

Figure 4: Which level of undergraduate modules did you mainly teach last academic year? 24%, 40%, 36% — level 1, level 2, level 3

Figure 5: Of these from which level was the highest proportion of assignments/feedback uncollected? 17%, 46%, 24%, 13% — no significant difference between levels, level 1, level 2, level 3

- 46% indicated that this exceeded 20% of the work they had marked

- The level of non-collection was not significantly different between years 1, 2 & 3, although significantly more assignments appear to be collected from semester 1 work

See Figures 6-7

fig 6

fig 7
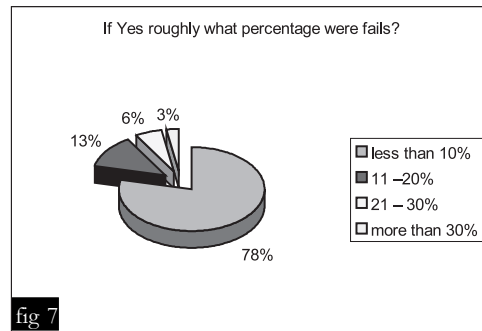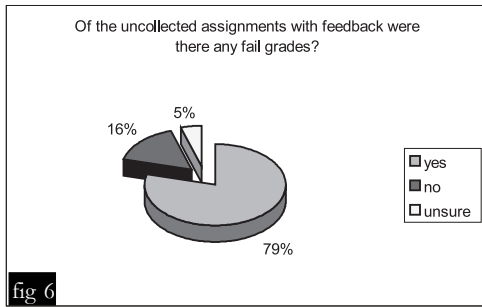
- 68% indicated that the non-collected work included fail grades. This is a worrying trend, as Gibbs, (2003) reminds us of a fundamental truism, "students need appropriate feedback to benefit from courses"(Chickering and Gamson1987). 'Fail' students may continue to fail if they do not collect and act on feedback.

The reasons why students do not collect their work/feedback:

See Figure 8

fig 8
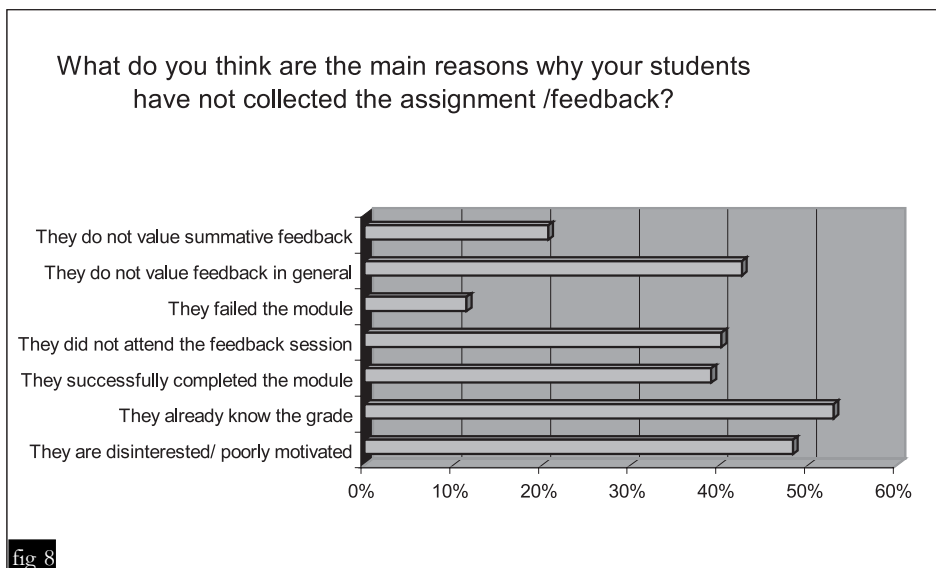
Grade related reasons

53% stated that students tended not to collect work if they know the grade. This was also endorsed by comments such as *"Where students know by another means they have been successful they are likely not to collect".*

"Students do not see the value of feedback if they have their grade."

"The grade IS the feedback".

"They will often e-mail to get their grade but do not have time or inclination to collect it".

The continued emphasis of grading and its impact on the feedback and the non-collection of assignments are well rehearsed (Hounsell, 1987;Jackson, 1995;Higgins, 2001). Chalmers and Fuller, (1996) suggest, "too much emphasis is usually placed on the grading function of assessment, and too little on its role in helping students to learn." (p46). The pivotal part played by knowledge of grades in the non-collection of feedback was also emphasised in the student group responses.

Motivational reasons

Findings indicate 48% of students were perceived to be uninterested or poorly motivated in collecting results. Linking grades and motivation, one tutor stated that the grading scale encourages *'instrumental motivation.'* As one tutor put it*, "They want the paper not the knowledge." Here students appear to be adopting a 'surface' rather than 'deep' learning approach.* (Biggs, 2003)

Do not value the feedback

64% were deemed to not value feedback. It is perhaps a side effect of assessment that feedback is deemed by some students to be what the teacher does to or for the student. The value of feedback must be shared. Gibbs (2003) suggests ways of getting students to engage with feedback, such as:

- Asking what they would like feedback on

- Providing feedback but no grade

- Self-assessing the work – to match own views with teacher views

- Using two stage assignments with feedback on the first stage with the second part graded.

Collection issues

Many of the qualitative comments suggested the inclusion of a cllection facility for those unable to attend feedback sessions. Disturbingly, a figure of 40% of students missing the feedback sessions was indicated. This raises attendance issues and the need to seek other ways of ensuring the uptake of feedback. It was noted in the qualitative data that an apparently successful *'collection facility'* had operated at Dudley campus, which indicated a more flexible time scale for students to receive their work and feedback. The idea of a *'central returning system'* was reiterated by a number of other respondents, one of whom stated that students might not collect assignments because "*they have to track down at least four lecturers each semester*". Other respondents indicating a need for greater flexibility in returning assignment work echoed this.
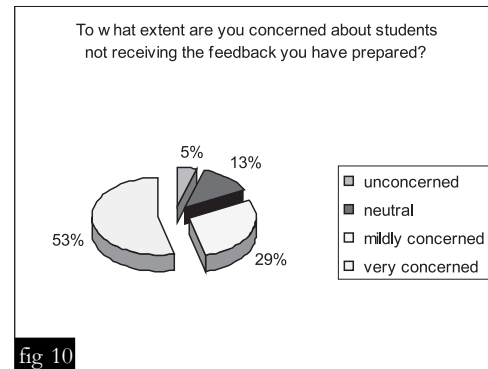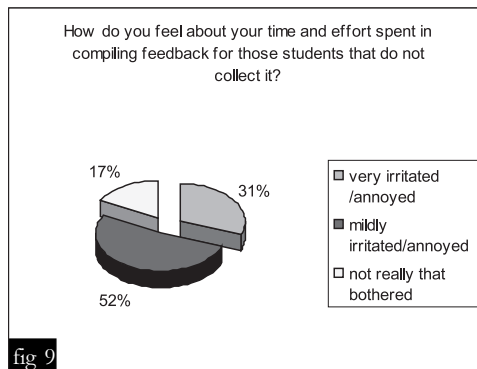
Data collected from the students also suggested a central collection point as beneficial.

About the nature of feedback

A concern was raised by one respondent who stated *"They do not know how to act upon the advice, and take it as negative".* Black & Wiliam (1998) state that students "avoid investing effort in learning which could lead to disappointment."p9. Many other tutors supported these ideas. One said that feedback is taken "*as a criticism of THEM when comments are made about the WORK. The respondent went on to suggest that students need to be "taught how to use feedback and view it more unemotively."* Also teachers should be mindful of the effect of feedback on self-esteem. Tutors needed to *"make feedback less like a punishment"* in order that students are more likely to seek feedback than to leave it.

Teachers' perceptions on time and effort in compiling feedback, which is not collected.

See Figure 9-10

How do you feel about your time and effort spent in compiling feedback for those students that do not collect it?

- very irritated /annoyed
- mildly irritated/annoyed
- not really that bothered

17%
31%
52%

fig 9

To what extent are you concerned about students not receiving the feedback you have prepared?

- unconcerned
- neutral
- mildly concerned
- very concerned

5%
13%
53%
29%

fig 10

83% of teachers were 'irritated and annoyed' by students who do not make use of the feedback provided. The qualitative remarks for this question were extensive, but focused on a few key areas. One of these commentaries suggests that the 'annoyance' is mainly aimed at concern that students will not get the help they need to improve their work, and that it is often the 'weaker' students who tend not to collect the feedback. Here again the single most important denominator in feedback was the power of the 'grade', with students labelled as being *'grade obsessed'*. *"It is a pity that some students place a high value on the grade but not on the wherewithal to improve the grades"*. "Students couldn't care less when they know their grades." This is endorsed by Race and Brown (1998) who state *"feedback may be eclipsed by marks or grades."p54*

One respondent raised an interesting point that the nature and extent of the feedback tended to be dictated by QAA and other inspection demands. Whereas students' wanted grades *"as quick as possible with some points to consider for improving the assignment"* rather than the *"long written feedback that appears to have become an expectation…of the QAA processes."* This raises a potentially contentious point about whom the feedback is for. A number of the tutors remarked that giving feedback was an integral part of the teaching role, and although the time resource used on providing feedback was often extensive the responsibility for collection lay with the students. The depth of feeling about this question can be crystallised by the following comments. *"I wish feedback was read, understood and acted upon."* and *"both staff effort and student potential are wasted as a result of non-collection of feedback."*

Concern about students not receiving feedback

72% of tutors stated they were concerned to a lesser or greater degree about students not receiving feedback. The key issues identified were:

- Students will continue to make the same mistakes

- There is a need to feedback and 'feed forward', (Orsmond et al (2002) Bringing out the relevance of feedback for other modules

- Concern for failing and 'weak' students

- Keen and 'A' grade students tend to always collect their work, and actively seek further feedback

Student results indicated that some found the feedback difficult to understand.

The issue of understanding feedback is highlighted by Higgins (2000), which identifies problems of using academic language e.g. "be more critical" may not make sense to the student.

Approaches to ensure students collect their assignments

See Figure 11

Which do you think would best ensure that more students collected their assignments/feedback?

fig 11
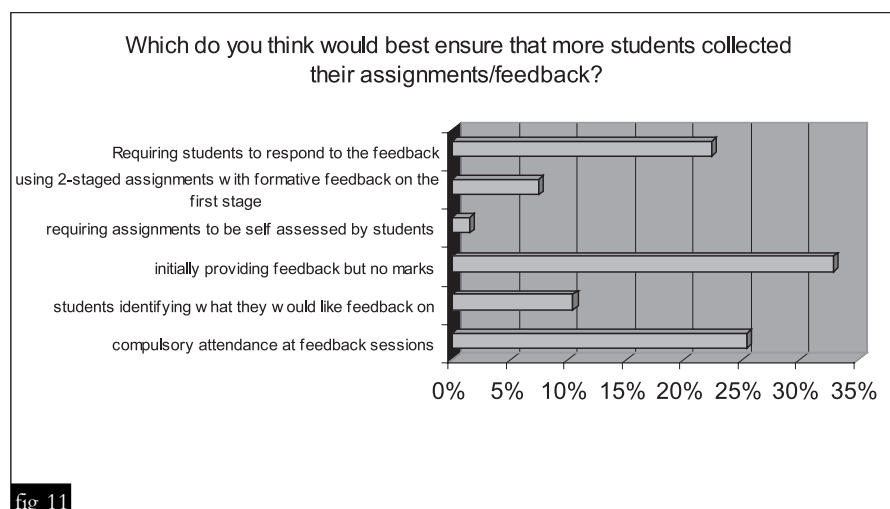
The 3 answers receiving most responses were: -

- Initially providing feedback but no marks (33%),

- Requiring students to respond to feedback (22%)

- Compulsory attendance at feedback sessions (25%).

The commentary showed that many were dubious about the 'compulsory' session. There was support for withholding the grade until students collect their work. One tutor provided a useful idea: "Sending the feedback electronically would make collection effort free and also free up tutor time."

The idea of providing feedback but no grade is endorsed by Gibbs (2003). Race (2003) indicates that feedback should become more of a transaction between teacher and student, which becomes empowering and dialogic. The idea of seeking a more dialogical approach to feedback was welcomed by some of the students who said:

- There are difficulties in seeing tutors for only 15 minute slots

- Tutors do not respond to specific questions – feedback is general

- Feedback is more of a listening process, you do not question the tutor

- Tutors to ask students to identify specific areas for comment

Evaluation

The research has provided some useful and interesting data about the patterns of non-collection of assignments and feedback. However, given the limited response rate to the questionnaire and the very small number of students involved in the research group a cautionary note must be sounded around any general conclusions drawn. This said, in defence of the research process and the data gathered, a substantial amount of information has been accrued which does help to point the way toward possibilities that can help student learning through the feedback processes adopted by the university.

Some key areas for consideration might be:

- The organisation of assignment collection points on all campuses with flexible access – for students unable to access and attend identified feedback sessions.

- The development of feedback guidelines directed at: -

➢ Explaining the purposes and values of feedback to students e.g. focusing on the distinctions between grades and other feedback and the perceived value of each. (Rust et al 2003)

➢ Focusing on the distinctions between formative and summative feedback and the perceived value of each

➢ Identifying ways of engaging the student more in the feedback process, such as feedback about the feedback from students i.e. creating more dialogical approaches to the process of feedback e.g. through more formative approaches, and feedback without grades. Higgins et al (2001) prompts us to, "pay more attention to feedback as a process of communication." p70. In order to 'let the student in' to academic literacies used in the writing of feedback.

Clearly, the use of formative feedback and the assessment for learning may warrant another look within university practices. This could involve a review of habits and expectations of both students and teachers, about the perceived value of grades and feedback (Little and Lester, 1998), and a re-education of both. "A key issue for any tertiary institution is how to undo the habits and expectations of both staff and students with respect to perceived value of fine grade and/or percentage distinctions." (p454)

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