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What is This?
Understanding arts and humanities students’ experiences of assessment and feedback

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Abstract
This article examines how undergraduate students on arts and humanities courses experience assessment and feedback. The research uses a detailed audit, a specially devised questionnaire (the Assessment Experience Questionnaire), and student focus group data, and the article examines results from 19 programmes, comparing those from ‘arts and humanities’ courses with those from ‘other’ programmes to give a sense of the particular characteristics of assessment and feedback for arts and humanities students. Findings indicate that teachers in the arts and humanities should focus on ensuring that students understand goals and standards, particularly by giving feedback often and in time for application to other learning activities and assignments. The evidence that this type of research provides can help programme teams evaluate whether intended learning outcomes are being achieved and decide on any pedagogical interventions required.

Keywords
AEQ, assessment, feedback, pedagogy, programme

Introduction
Assessment and feedback form an integral part of students’ experience at university, affecting how and what they learn, their study behaviour and their perceptions of the learning environment; indeed, ‘assessment is the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to courses and behave as learners’
Since 2005, students in their final year of study at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom have been encouraged to complete the National Student Survey (NSS), rating their experience of programmes and institutions in categories such as ‘learning resources’, ‘teaching’, ‘organisation and management’ and ‘assessment and feedback’. Consistently, students in the UK, like those in Australia, ‘have been notably less positive about assessment and feedback on their assignments than about other aspects of their course experience’ (Williams and Kane, 2008: 2). In addition, the English government has recently uncapped student fees, moving from a largely state-funded higher education system toward a model that places more financial responsibility on the individual. The increase in student fees, capped in 2010/11 at £3,290, is significant: ‘from September 2012, universities and others providing higher education will be able to charge up to £6,000 a year for their courses. Some will be able to charge up to £9,000 a year’ (BIS, 2012). This development, among others, is beginning to force more scrutiny of the student experience. For example, also from September 2012, higher education institutions will be required to publish Key Information Sets (KIS), which will provide statistical data about a range of factors, from graduate employability to class contact time and patterns of assessment, for prospective students on all undergraduate degree courses (HEFCE, 2012).

While the UK higher education sector is undergoing rapid change, arts and humanities subjects are under particular strain. Changing funding structures are perceived to favour STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects, which some argue contribute more to students’ employability and, as a result, the country’s economic wellbeing (Attwood, 2010). Consequently, those working in arts and humanities departments may feel defensive about the value of their programmes for the country and individual students (Ashley and Rossiter, 2012). It is important that students studying arts and humanities subjects report high satisfaction on the NSS, that departments return KIS data that can be educationally justified, and that arts and humanities programmes continue to recruit strongly, particularly from the highest achieving groups of school leavers.

Higher education in the UK also has a culture of quality assurance processes that aim to audit, maintain and improve standards across the sector. Processes include regular internal review of programmes; a network of external examiners who verify assessment results, along with other aspects of the student experience; and external institutional audits conducted regularly by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The type of data we discuss in this article is not collected primarily for quality assurance purposes; however, programme leaders might decide that it could form part of the evidence presented in an internal or external review. As Ford (2010) notes, in the UK as well as the USA disciplinary contexts tend to be considered when evaluating standards; for example, external examiners are usually recruited from professional subject-based networks, and external panel members for internal reviews of programmes will have relevant expertise. This does not mean that quality assurance processes are always
welcomed by practising academics; indeed, there is some evidence that well-meaning quality assurance frameworks can hinder the improvement of student learning by discouraging aspects of effective assessment and feedback processes (Jessop et al., 2012).

With student experience now more explicitly linked to departmental income, students’ experiences of assessment and feedback play a critical role in institutional management of educational provision and quality, as well as in students’ learning overall. Assessment design and feedback processes need to be clear and effective to improve students’ reported experience of their programme, thereby attracting more students and funding to the institution and department.

Of course, aside from strategic considerations for arts and humanities programmes, students’ experiences of assessment and feedback are well worth examining because of their strong relationship to student learning (Gibbs, 1999). Student learning behaviours are strongly influenced by the type, timing and relevance of assignments; students are much more likely to work hard on assessed tasks than non-assessed learning activities (Gibbs, 1999: 42–43). With assessment and feedback playing such a pivotal role in the increasingly-analysed student experience, programme leaders need a full picture of how students’ learning and perception are formed by the assessment and feedback processes on their course. The research we discuss here provides evidence of student learning and behaviours; this evidence can be used by programme teams to make improvements to course assessment design and feedback practices.

The research

This article compares data from arts and humanities subjects against data from other subject areas (including social sciences and professional programmes) to give a sense of how students behave and learn as a result of assessment and feedback processes. The data were collected as part of the Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA: http://www.testa.ac.uk) project, a three-year (2009–12) National Teaching Fellowship award from the UK’s Higher Education Academy (HEA). Underpinned by Gibbs and Simpson’s work (2004) and Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick’s (2006) principles of effective feedback and assessment, the TESTA methodology triangulates data from an audit of assessment and feedback practices, responses to the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ), and focus group transcripts to give a comprehensive view of students’ experiences across their degree programme. TESTA is unusual in providing evidence of assessment and feedback patterns across whole programmes rather than only at the modular level (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009; Jessop et al., 2011); therefore, our article can compare student perceptions of assessment and feedback on entire arts and humanities degree courses. We present the results of our analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data and consider the implications for leaders and teachers in arts and humanities subjects.
Throughout this article we use UK terminology. In the UK an undergraduate degree ‘course’ or ‘programme’ normally comprises three years of full-time study, usually consisting of 6–10 ‘modules’ or ‘units’ each year. In general, the term ‘assessment’ refers to measurement of student learning, rather than evaluation of the effectiveness of the whole programme; in the UK the term ‘quality assurance’ is used to describe processes that ensure standards are being met. The specific term ‘formative assessment’ is used here to refer to student assignments that receive tutor feedback but do not count toward a student’s final grade for a unit or module.

Principles of assessment and feedback

We know that ‘assessment matters . . . to students, the tutors who assess them’ and all involved in teaching and learning in higher education (Brown and Glasner, 1999: vii). There is substantial research to show that assessment design and feedback processes shape students’ behaviour, learning and experience. The core principles for improving students’ learning and experience through assessment and feedback include developing appropriate assignments; assessment patterns that encourage sustained student effort and time on useful tasks; communicating standards clearly and often; and regularly providing timely, useful feedback that helps students improve. Assessment can also be used to check whether students have met the intended learning outcomes for the course and give teaching teams an indication of how the course activities can be enhanced.

We also know that assessment should encourage regular and sustained effort throughout a programme. While ‘time on task’ (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) is important, we also need to encourage time on the ‘right’ tasks or topics at a deep level, prioritizing what Meyer and Land (2003) might deem ‘threshold concepts’. Effective assessment tasks require engagement with the material in a meaningful way for sustained periods across a module or course; ineffective assessment design can lead to ‘cramming’ or ‘long hours of ineffective memorization’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004: 12). This ‘time on task’ should be targeted: it should encourage appropriate learning related to the intended learning outcomes (ILOs). Biggs and Tang (2007) advocate the ‘constructive alignment’ of ILOs, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks. Applying constructive alignment requires careful thinking about the educational philosophies underpinning the programme, as well as subject/disciplinary conventions and signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005). The challenge of constructive alignment is to set measurable goals for students, to design teaching and learning activities that are focused on the best ways of helping students to attain those goals, and to devise assessment processes and tasks that provide students with both good feedback on the progress of their learning and a valid, fair, and reliable evaluation of their achievement in relation to the objectives. We need to have a clear understanding (shared with students) of our educational goals before mapping learning activities and appropriate assessment.
We can also use constructive alignment to communicate clear goals and standards. While communication of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and marking standards can help students understand expectations, too much or inappropriate information can be confusing. For some students, especially those with ‘autobiographical selves’ that create an ‘outsider’ identity in the academy (Adams, 2009; Ivanič, 1998), the language used in official documentation can be confusing. To facilitate learning for all students, the application of criteria should be demystified and clearly communicated. To this end, the development of practices such as peer learning and ‘encouraging students to believe they are part of a community of scholarship’ (Bostock, 2000) can often help students.

Goals and standards are also clarified when students receive high volumes of formative feedback on assessment tasks of a similar type (Gibbs, 2010). Students need opportunities to practise and adjust their performance based on peer and/or teacher feedback. High variety of types of assessment within a programme can lead to fragmentation of learning, because students may not recognize the transferable nature of the feedback to other assessment items. For example, if students complete a portfolio in year one, but never again submit this type of assignment, the feedback they receive may not be applied to other assessment types (e.g. presentations or essays). Effective assessment design requires opportunities for the feedback to ‘feed forward’, bridging learning across contained modules. Giving high quantities of formative feedback throughout a module and course ensures that students will have an opportunity to learn, and not perceive feedback simply as a justification of the grade awarded. The key distinction here is between two important purposes of assessment that are not always well connected: the need to provide valid, reliable assessments of students’ learning achievement/performance, and the need to utilize the powerful influences of assessment and feedback processes to support and develop students’ learning.

‘It is a truism that learners require feedback in order to learn’ (Gibbs, 1999: 46). But feedback must be of sufficient quality and quantity. Effective feedback ‘helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)’ (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006: 205). In order to achieve this, we need to ensure that ‘sufficient feedback is provided, both often enough and in enough detail’ (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004: 17). Feedback should clearly identify where students have met or not met the learning outcomes, hopefully before any summative assessment. Regular feedback on formative or low-stakes summative assessment clarifies expectations.

Feedback also needs to come in time for it to be applied on subsequent related or similar learning and assessment tasks. Feedback given at the end of a module or programme when students might not see the relevance to other areas of study and work, or might not even see the feedback at all, will not influence learning. In addition, the variety of assessment types should be streamlined, so that students can try out their new learning on another similar task.

Gibbs (2010) argues that feedback should also relate to the students’ understanding of what they are supposed to be doing: telling a student that their work
‘isn’t scholarly enough’ will not necessarily convey that they should be reading higher-quality texts, evaluating methodologies, or critically examining ideas through a theoretical framework (or whatever it is we might mean by ‘scholarly’). Feedback that relates to specific parts of students’ work, in terms they can understand, will be more valuable because it can be used.

Essentially, effective feedback ‘provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance’ (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006: 205). Assessment and feedback practices form a valuable part of students’ learning experience and dictate student study behaviour (Gibbs, 1999). As described below, quality and quantity of feedback, usefulness of feedback, clear goals and standards, and appropriate assessment correlate closely with students’ overall satisfaction with their course.

**Methods and methodology**

Use of the TESTA methodology provides researchers and teaching teams with a holistic overview of the assessment and feedback experiences of students on their programme. The methodology comprises three elements: an audit of the assessment scheme of the programme, a questionnaire completed by final-year students on the programme, and student focus groups. These three data sources are triangulated and synthesized in case studies, providing a compelling narrative about assessment patterns on each whole degree programme (Jessop et al., 2011). Each of the three elements is explored in more detail below.

**Audit**

First, the researchers collected information about the nature and pattern of assessment and feedback practices as recorded in the official course documentation (e.g. degree handbook, module descriptors) and from a semi-structured interview with the programme leader. The researcher and programme leader mapped a typical pathway for an undergraduate student, examining core (mandatory) and popular elective (optional) modules in order to determine the assessment and feedback pattern across the programme. The data collected during this process included the following:

- total number of assessed assignments (formative and summative),
- number of summative assessments,
- number of formative assessments,
- number of different types of assessments the student encountered (variety),
- percentage of total assessments that are examinations,
- average number of days it takes for a piece of work to be returned to a student,
- amount of oral feedback a student typically receives during their entire three years of study (minutes), which includes tutorial time and group feedback.
The amount of written feedback given to a student was calculated from the cover sheets and scripts of approximately 20 student assignments for each year of the programme; for example, the majority of programmes used in this study ran for three years, which meant 60 pieces of work and cover sheets were analysed. These assignments were randomly selected across modules and a variety of assessments in order to make the sampling fair and representative. This part of the methodology was purely quantitative, but, taken with the other data, contributes to the overall picture of assessment and feedback practices on the programme.

**Assessment experience questionnaire (AEQ)**

Gibbs’ extensive research into assessment and feedback literature, searching for the positive approaches students take to learning, resulted in a paper which identified ten conditions of assessment and feedback that influence learning (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). These ten conditions are:

1. quantity of effort students put into learning across their course (QOE),
2. coverage of syllabus (COS),
3. quantity and quality of feedback (QQF),
4. usefulness of feedback (UF),
5. appropriate assessment (AA),
6. clear goals and standards (CGS),
7. surface approach to learning – a negative approach (SA),
8. deep approach to learning (DA),
9. learning from examinations (EX),
10. overall satisfaction (OS).

The AEQ tests students’ perceptions of the ten conditions. The AEQ comprises 28 statements that the participant rates on a five-point Likert scale. There is additional space at the end of the survey for students to comment further, which means the AEQ can also gather some qualitative data. The questionnaire is open source, and has undergone rigorous statistical tests, including Cronbach’s alpha, to ensure the data produced are accurate and relate to the ten categories. The AEQs were distributed to final-year students at the beginning or the end of a lecture to maximize the response rate from the target audience. Completed AEQs were then input into SPSS statistical software, and descriptive and inferential statistical tests were performed on the data.

**Focus groups**

Student focus groups were used to gather verbal evidence of students’ perceptions about their experiences of assessment and feedback, and the ‘assessment environment’ for their degree. This element provides rich qualitative data to complement
the quantitative aspects of the TESTA methodology. Final-year students were invited to participate in a focus group of approximately five students per group. In order to encourage a high participation rate, book vouchers and refreshments were offered as incentives. This method is an example of opportunistic sampling; the number of students participating from programmes varied depending on the level of interest from the particular cohort. Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour, and we used a semi-structured interview technique to keep the questions focused on assessment and feedback, but also to allow conversations to flow. Each session was recorded, transcribed and then put into Atlas.ti (analytical software) for thematic analysis. Combining the AEQ comments with the focus group data ensured that the quantitative findings of the research processes could be analysed with awareness of the particular learning and assessment contexts of each degree programme.

Findings were presented to teaching teams in a case study format, with particular attention to recurrent themes emerging from the analysis of the three data sets. Programme leaders and their teams then interpreted the findings in light of the particular ‘socio-cultural and institutional contexts’ (Ivanič, 1998) in which the students study.

**Exploring the experiences of students on arts and humanities programmes**

In order to explore assessment and feedback on arts and humanities programmes, we analysed all TESTA data collected to date from 19 programmes. The data were then split into ‘arts and humanities’ (9) and ‘other’ programmes (10). We identified ‘arts and humanities’ and ‘other’ programmes by aligning the subjects with UK research councils. The following TESTA programmes align to priorities within the Arts and Humanities Research Council: American Studies, Creative Writing, English, Graphic Communications, History, Media Communications, Media Studies, Philosophy, and Theology and Religious Studies. The programmes in the ‘other’ category were: Computing, Education, Geography, Law, Nursing, Pharmacy, Politics, Primary Education (initial teacher training), Psychology, and Web Systems. By dividing the data this way, we were able to draw out students’ experiences on a particular set of programmes, and we can use the ‘other’ programmes for comparisons and/or to demonstrate similar practices.

**Results**

**Audit**

The audit data show how characteristics of assessment and feedback differ between the arts and humanities courses and the ‘other’ programmes studied here. Table 1 displays the audit data, including the mean and range for each of the categories.
Key points from Table 1 include the following:

- Students on arts and humanities programmes receive an average of over 2,000 more words of written feedback than students on other courses (despite the fact that one of the ‘other’ programmes gives their students an average of 15,440 words of written feedback).
- As might be expected, assessment by ‘examination’ forms a much smaller percentage of total assessment on arts and humanities programmes (12.3%) than on other programmes (26%).
- Programmes outside the arts and humanities have more formative assessment points, and a higher volume of oral feedback.
- Arts and humanities programmes have less variety of assessment types.

**AEQ**

Through the TESTA project to date, 1,159 usable student AEQ responses have been collected from eight universities, across 19 programmes; 413 questionnaire responses were from arts or humanities courses, leaving the remaining 746 completed surveys from the ten ‘other’ programmes. Table 2 shows the mean scores in Gibbs’ ten conditions of learning.
Table 2 shows that students studying arts and humanities subjects are more satisfied with their course overall, 0.31 points higher than ‘other’ programmes. Students on ‘other’ courses report that they work slightly harder, but their assessments are not as appropriate as on arts and humanities courses, therefore their hard work may not result in better learning. Students on non-arts and humanities programmes seem to learn more from examinations. Comments left on the AEQ suggest that students on arts and humanities programmes deem examinations ‘the least useful as a method of assessment. It is equally a test of memory as of understanding’ (American Studies). Similarly another student declares ‘I want to specify that I am vastly in favour of coursework over exams; I feel they give you a much better chance to show what you can do’ (English).

The research team used nonparametric tests on the audit data and AEQ scores to determine any positive or negative correlations/relationships between the two sets of data, and tests of difference. There were a number of significant results for arts and humanities courses; for instance as the number of assignments increases, so does the time it takes for feedback to be returned to the students, although they often receive more written words for the wait. Furthermore, students on arts and humanities programmes received more oral feedback on their work when they experienced a high volume of summative assessment, and more variety of assessments. In contrast, ‘other’ programmes demonstrated a stronger relationship between higher volumes of formative assessment and oral feedback, therefore the more formative assessment students completed, the more likely they were to receive oral feedback on their work. Results from ‘other’ programmes demonstrated that, as their percentage of exams increased, their variety of assessments decreased, and vice versa. For arts and humanities programmes the relationship between variety and percentage of exams was a weak but significant positive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Arts and humanities</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Whole data set</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantity of effort</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage of syllabus</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quantity and quality of feedback</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Usefulness of feedback</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate assessment</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear goals and standards</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface approach</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep approach</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from exams</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
relationship. This can be explained by the culture of assessment in these types of subjects.

The most significant results in the AEQ data for arts and humanities programmes were between clear goals and standards (CGS) and students’ overall satisfaction (OS); quantity and quality of feedback (QQF) and overall satisfaction (OS); and quantity and quality of feedback (QQF) and clear goals and standards (CGS). This suggests that, in order to improve overall satisfaction scores, arts and humanities programme teams should address issues surrounding clarity of goals and standards, and focus on improving the quantity and quality of feedback. ‘Other’ programmes had similar but less significant results than arts and humanities courses, with ‘other’ programmes also having an additional significant relationship between usefulness of feedback (UF) and overall satisfaction (OS). Both categories of programmes displayed a negative correlation between appropriate assessment and surface approach to learning; assessment that helps students learn more reduces the likelihood of a surface approach to learning.

Further interesting results are between the audit and AEQ data; for example, arts and humanities programmes have a positive relationship between clear goals and standards and volume of oral feedback, as well as clear goals and standards and volume of written feedback (as one category increases, as does the other). Moreover, oral feedback has a significant relationship with student overall satisfaction. ‘Other’ programmes did not display any strong significant results between the audit and AEQ data.

Focus groups

Over 50 focus groups were conducted, with an average of six students per group. The number of students in a single group never exceeded eight, while the lowest number of students in a group was two. The focus group results tend to corroborate the AEQ data; Table 3 shows the types of comments students on arts and humanities courses make about the aspects of their assessment experience that most directly correlate with overall satisfaction.

Discussion

From our work with programme teams it is clear to us that the meaning of TESTA ‘findings’ very much depends on the subject, context and signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005). For example, assessment design that encourages coverage of a whole syllabus might be imperative in one programme, but teaching teams in other subjects might decide that students need only apply deep learning to key elements, or master ‘threshold’ concepts rather than all topics that are (ostensibly) studied. Similarly, in rare circumstances, a higher degree of surface learning may be appropriate if the subject requires students to remember information rather than synthesize it.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor and description</th>
<th>Indicative comments from focus groups</th>
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| **Usefulness of feedback:** Students’ use of feedback to inform subsequent learning and assignments | ‘The feedback I got from...my tutor, after my assessment, really helped me to see where I could go in the...module that I’m taking next year, so the feedback he’d given me on the selection of work I handed in last year really helped to show me where my strengths were in it and what sort of writing I was better at and where I could take that writing in the longer module this year. So, that was really, really helpful.’  
‘I personally use it as if there’s something I’ve specifically done wrong on the first one then I’ll change that to do better on the next.’ |
| **Quality and quantity of feedback:** How often students receive feedback and how good that feedback is perceived to be | ‘Also I guess the more frequently you’re assessed in one particular module, then the more feedback you’re going to get.’  
‘Personally I find it more helpful the feedback you get in informal ways week to week.’  
‘There are some lecturers I find who are really, really good at feedback and their feedback has been really constructive and helpful.’  
‘I think the good thing about the course is definitely the regular feedback and some tutors are really, really good and really, really help you and give you extra help.’  
‘We have feedback quite often, so we have for our dissertation fairly regular tutorials and for the studio work you also have tutorials. It’s kind of then when you find out if you’re doing OK, you’re doing the right thing. The feedback is really helpful.’ |
| **Clear goals and standards:** Students’ understanding of what ‘good’ is | ‘Overall the course is good, clear instructions and expectations.’  
‘We were given a handout of the five different types of self-reflections and had to decide which was the best one. That was very helpful because what we thought was the best one wasn’t, and so when we were writing our own self-reflections we had a very good reference to use.’  
‘You read the criteria. That’s pretty much the rule book. If you know that you’ve ticked off each of the marking criteria you should be pretty confident in getting one of the highest [marks].’ |
| **Overall satisfaction:** What students studying arts and humanities subjects value from their university experience | ‘Personally I would be quite happy to do three years at university, do really good work, getting taught really well, have good lectures, we’ve got good lecturers here, guest lecturers and stuff like that, but if that didn’t come out with a [high] mark and my work spoke for itself, then I’d be more than happy.’  
‘No matter what mark I get I know that I will have a good portfolio personally. I will feel that my portfolio is good, to a decent standard, because that’s what I’m going to go and show the world. I think this year I’m not bothered so much about getting marks constantly because we’ve all kind of found ourselves a little bit.’ |
Students on arts and humanities courses seem more satisfied overall with their assessment experiences than students on other programmes. The strong relationship between ‘quantity and quality of feedback’ and ‘clear goals and standards’ with overall satisfaction means that students on these courses have a broadly positive assessment experience. The relationship between usefulness of feedback and overall satisfaction, though weaker, is also significant and plays well to the strengths of arts and humanities assessment and feedback practices. Similarly, arts and humanities programmes show a negative correlation (as one condition increases in score, the other decreases) between a surface approach to learning and appropriate assessment: if assessments are designed to encourage learning, students are less likely to take a surface approach.

Teaching teams should also note that as the number of assessed assignments increases, so does the time it takes to return work to students; by linking this with the fact that ‘appropriate assessment’ has a negative correlation with surface approach to learning, we can surmise that if courses use fewer assessments more targeted to the learning outcomes, and the assignments are quickly returned to students, deeper learning results. Teaching teams need to consider their purposes in providing feedback: is it only to provide a valid, reliable account of student performance, or also to support/develop more learning/higher achievement, for example by showing students how to address their shortcomings, raising students’ aspirations and stimulating greater student effort.

The project team recognizes that the programmes examined have independent disciplinary cultures, and that some of the audit data rely on official documentation that may not give an accurate picture of students’ experience on the course because of variability in teachers’ approaches to the use and interpretation of course documentation. However, we hope to reduce the risk of such factors by collecting and analysing data from a range of sources. As this methodology is applied to more programmes, across more institutions, the TESTA team will grow the data sets and be able to analyse a wider cross-section of assessment and feedback practices in higher education, and specifically for arts and humanities courses.

Conclusions and recommendations

Those who lead and teach on arts and humanities programmes should be encouraged by the results of this study; students report a positive learning experience supported by the assessment and feedback processes on the programmes. To continue to improve students’ experiences, teaching teams might be well advised to ensure the following.

1. Goals and standards are clearly communicated: Gibbs (2010) cautions against simply providing high volumes of written criteria because ‘the words used in articulating criteria are seldom meaningful to students and it is difficult for a student to tell what standard is expected or would be considered inadequate’. Rather, student learning improves when ‘when they get plenty of practice at the...
same kind of assignment with good written and oral feedback, so they come to understand, over time, what is expected’.

2. Feedback is useful and meaningful: the recommendation for more feedback does not mean that the number of summative assessments should increase. Rather, students should receive plenty of formative feedback outlining ‘what they can do next time to improve’ (Gibbs, 2010). The feedback should be forward-looking, specific and presented in meaningful terms for the students.

3. Students receive feedback in time for application to their next similar assignment.

4. Assessments encourage a deep approach to learning: ‘What matters here is students’ perceptions of the assessment demands, not the teachers’ intentions…The crucial question here is whether students need to think and engage in intellectually demanding activity in order to tackle their assignments or tests, or whether they only require, at the minimum, routine, busy work and memorizing’ (Gibbs, 2010).

It is also worth examining documentation and practices on the programme to ensure teaching and learning activities and assessment are constructively aligned to the intended learning outcomes (Biggs and Tang, 2007). Appropriate assessment ensures that students’ learning activities relate to what they are supposed to be learning.

Finally, teaching teams may wish to ask a consultant to use the TESTA Research Toolkit (TESTA, 2010), which includes the audit steps, AEQ and focus group questions, to examine students’ experience of assessment and feedback on specific programmes. Though the tools can be used by programme leaders or teaching teams, problems of bias may render AEQ and focus group data less reliable. TESTA researchers can also ensure standardization of data collection and analysis to ensure comparability with other programmes.

Programme leaders in the creative arts should note that the TESTA data have raised interesting questions about the methodology’s suitability for creative programmes. In particular, students on Creative Writing, Media Communications and Graphic Communications degrees have commented that the AEQ questions did not always relate to their experience of assessment and feedback; this is because students on these courses do not normally sit exams or write as many traditional essays as those on other programmes. Assessment tends to consist of portfolios of creative work and critical reflections on their own practice. The AEQ may need to be adapted for use on these types of programme.

Other questions include the effect of technology on students’ experience of feedback and assessment. Many students in the TESTA focus groups referred to a variety of media used to assess their work and deliver feedback. The developing JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee)-funded FASTECH (Feedback and Assessment for Students with Technology) project uses the TESTA data as a baseline to examine how staff and students’ experiences change when readily available technologies are used to address pedagogical and practical issues in assessment and feedback.
Whatever the impact of technology, assessment and feedback remains an important issue for all educators with an interest in improving the student experience: to improve student satisfaction and learning we must consider how assessment patterns, types, variety and feedback influence students’ behaviour, and adjust assessment activities accordingly. In the new ‘marketplace’ for students in UK higher education, teachers will need to ensure that assessment design and feedback processes provide clear indications of expectations and performance on a regular basis. There is also a need to recognize that quality assurance processes do not always lead to improved student learning (Jessop et al., 2012); evidence from TESTA-type research might be used to inform improvement at the programme, institutional and sector levels.

Assessment and feedback are not sidelines to the learning experience, or activities that happen on the margins of academic life for the defence of grades. Assessment and feedback activities are at the heart of students’ experiences in higher education; our efforts to improve student learning and experience must acknowledge this.

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References


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