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An interpretive phenomenological analysis of nursing student perceptions of summative assessment feedback using LEGO® Serious Play®

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the study is to explore perceptions of the impact of assessment feedback by international undergraduate nursing students. Research to date indicates that summative assessment feedback may impact significantly on student achievement but if it is undertaken sub optimally or does not provide students with the opportunity to engage with the process and reflexively respond, it can also be exceptionally damaging to the learning experience.

Design/methodology/approach – A scoping exercise of overall student feedback experience was initially collated via the adoption of an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA). Participants were recruited via purposive sampling and the LEGO® Serious Play® method was used to collect data. Analysis with Quirkos software was used to examine the salience as well as commonality of findings as an integral part of a recognised five-step thematic analytical approach.

Findings – Feedback was perceived, by students, as significantly impacting factor in relation to their overall progression, attainment and retention rates. Themes generated from the findings evidenced student perceptions that summative feedback is a positive driver and source of motivation for academic success and progression. It was perceived that levels of attainment were related to the clarity, quality and individualised nature of feedback that students received and that this was perceived to be evident in their final grades. These were accompanied by perceptions that feedback clarity also determined the potential of breaking down perceived student barriers to learning, their perceived capacity for effective assignment planning and preparation and the likelihood of them having any positive collective or individual interpersonal relationships with their tutors. Summarised, students perceived that feedback ought to lead to student empowerment in managing their studies and as such it ought to be clear, straightforward and nonambiguous. **Research limitations/implications** – The methodological design of the study means that generalisability from its findings was never intended or possible. However, there may be the potential transferability of findings to similar institutions and contexts of nurse education with students who have similar demographic profiling. The study was also a means of providing an insight into the lived experience of students which could be used in the prospective adaptation of feedback mechanisms for staff at a local level within Higher Education.

Author contribution:

Benjamin Ajibade

Contributed to the conception and design of the study, acquisition of data and analysis and interpretation of data, including drafting the article and revising it critically for important intellectual content.

Catherine Hayes

Contributed to reviewing, editing and revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content.

Practical implications – The study reveals the perceived impact of gamification as a mechanism of summative assessment as conveyed by a designated group of students. Whilst specific recommendations for change can only be made within the context specificity of the research, there may be aspects of the findings which are potentially transferable to other similar contexts of Higher Education delivery whose pedagogical approaches mirror those in operation at the institution where the research was undertaken. It became apparent that the standardisation of feedback approaches offered many opportunities to improve existing systems. The issue of monitoring workloads is also of significance in terms of the level and degree of summative assessment and feedback that academic staff can undertake.

Originality/value – The study revealed the perceived magnitude of assessment feedback on progression, attainment and retention rates, alongside the perceived need for a universal feedback template and the opportunity to provide audio-video feedback. This study adds to existing knowledge in the field of pedagogic practice about both the execution of LEGO® Serious Play® as a research methodology and why the perceptions of feedback as articulated and illuminated by a group of contemporary nursing students ought to matter in the context of Higher Education.

Keywords Assessment feedback, Academic progression, Attainment, Retention, Feedforward
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Summative feedback is acknowledged as an essential contribution to the likelihood of student progression. Summative assessment feedback remains a longstanding topic of discussion regarding the potential for optimal student progression, attainment and retention rates. [Smith and Lipnevich \(2018\)](#) posit feedback as any information regarding student performance which impacts on their potential to iteratively improve learning. This consolidates much of the previously and now dated work of seminal researchers such as, [Sadler \(1989\)](#) and [Hattie and Timperley \(2007\)](#). This is a contentious issue within Higher Education undergraduate provision since feedback has the potential to both positively and negatively impact on the individual recipient of it ([Hardavella et al., 2017](#)). Feedback ought to be utilised by the learner to augment and fine tune their overall assessment performance. Over the last decade there has reportedly been a significant increase in student queries and verbalised confusion about feedback received, which is well evidenced across a range of sources in the published literature ([Archer, 2010](#); [Jonsson, 2013](#); [Van de Ridder et al., 2015](#)). The essence of summative assessment feedback is to reinstate the importance of what the student did well and highlight what they did not do well in their current assignment submission ([Van de Ridder et al., 2008](#)). This enables them to improve on it in their consequent summative submissions. Research has shown that feedback plays a significant role in students' overall final grades at the end of their course ([Lipnevich and Smith, 2008](#)). However, as well as there being positive aspects of feedback. There are different views about assessment feedback, including but not limited to causing more confusion than direction for the students if not undertaken systematically [Mamoon-Al-Bashir et al. \(2016\)](#).

Numerous and diverse assessment methods are used in the HEI to evaluate the knowledge, skills and competencies of nursing students and to triangulate assessment as an integral part of quality assurance for the largest contingent of the contemporary healthcare workforce. These assessment mechanisms are specifically designed to ensure that nursing students are well-prepared to provide safe and effective patient care upon their qualification from the programme, as validated by Higher Education Institutions and approved by Professional Regulator and Statutory Body, the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Assessment methods adopted generally take the form of written examinations like written tests, quizzes, or comprehensive exams to assess their understanding of nursing concepts, theories and medical knowledge ([Oermann and Gaberson, 2019](#)). Clinical Skills Assessments are used to evaluate students' ability to perform essential nursing clinical skills, such as medication administration, wound dressings, patient assessment and other nursing procedures. Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) where students rotate through multiple stations with each focussing on a different clinical scenario, is used to assess clinical competence and communication skills and has been found to be useful ([Kassabry, 2023](#); [Rao and Rao, 2021](#)). Furthermore, case studies and care plans enable students to analyse and develop care plans, demonstrating their ability to apply nursing knowledge and critical thinking to individual patient care; reflective journals and portfolios are useful for nursing students to document clinical experiences, self-assessment and personal and professional growth throughout their

education. Other recognised methods include group projects, presentations, practical evaluations and clinical performance evaluations ([Oermann et al., 2018](#)).

There are other popular assessment methods in nursing, like the use of simulation-based assessments using high-fidelity mannequins and simulation scenarios, nursing students participate in simulated clinical situations to demonstrate their clinical decision-making, critical thinking and communication skills; role play and game-based pedagogical approaches. Simulation includes role-play and playing games, including re-creation and imaginative exercise ([Academic Development Centre, 2020](#)). [Keddington and Moore \(2019\)](#) asserted that simulation is useful in assessing high-risk and low-frequency skills to promote patient safety. Simulation is a good method of learning as it helps in improving the theoretical knowledge acquired by nursing students in a safe and protected space ([Koukourikos et al., 2021](#)). They further stated that this helps the students to practice clinical and assist in their decision-making skills thereby boosting their self-esteem and confidence. They recommended the use of other instructional techniques with stimulation. However, [Blani_e et al. \(2020\)](#) in their research postulated that simulation by gaming does not show any significant difference in clinical reasoning skills as compared to the traditional teaching methods. Simulation replaces actual patients with virtual standardised patients, using highfidelity mannequins and technologies to enhance learning ([Ryall et al., 2016](#)). Although, this comes with some limitations; as much as it resembles real-life situations, they are not real and it cannot approach a patient holistically ([Cohen and Boni, 2018](#)). Also, all the variables in emergency life situations are not included ([Hughes, 2018](#)).

Gamification, differs from simulation, in terms of being an effective tool for improving the understanding of students in a particular subject, including nursing. Gamification stimulates students learning by using game design and game elements in a learning environment to maximise enjoyment and engagement by capturing learners' interest, thereby inspiring them to learn ([Buljan, 2021](#)). In contrast simulation provides scenario based experiential learning, which is risk free in comparison to real world settings and enables iterative practice cycles to be undertaken. Games enable the emotional correlation between the content and students, impacting their attention, thereby making students retain better than just learning in class. Gamification uses systems of personalised storytelling as a mechanism of capturing metacognitive processing which the brain processes better than facts making game-based learning more beneficial for learners.

Games-based learning also uses game elements in a non-game context in enhancing comprehension and promoting better retention of what is learnt ([Buljan, 2021](#)). [Buljan \(2021\)](#) further posited that 80% of learners claimed learning would be more productive if it were more game-oriented, and 67% of students reported that a gamified course was more motivating than a traditional course. [Georgiev \(2023\)](#), in their top gamification statistics, confirmed that by 2020, the education gamification market is estimated to reach \$1.5bn and gamification participants score 14% higher on skill-based assessments in which nursing is one of them. Gamification results in the immediacy of feedback to enable learners to validate their performance against the learning goals and to develop iterative opportunities for improvement.

Feedback has long been recognised as being crucial to students learning and performance capabilities, and their perception of them and plays a significant role in the impact of feedback on their learning ([Havnes et al., 2012](#)). As outlined earlier in the paper, feedback can be regarded as a means of reinforcing messages that link motivations to the correct responses where students play a passive role leading to the ability for a predictable outcome ([Van der Kleij and Lipnevich, 2021](#)). Therefore, students play a role in the use of feedback information. [Van der Kleij et al. \(2019\)](#) opined that there are variations in the extent that students play an active role in the process of feedback, but some researchers adopted a procedural approach and postulated that students be told how to improve and take corrective action ([Torrance, 2012](#)). Other researchers have expressed the belief that feedback ought to be primarily student centred, encompassing processes of informative dialogue ([Carless, 2016](#)). This assertion is supported by the [University of Greenwich \(2023\)](#) which discusses feedback as a

dialogue rather than one-way communication linking the learning outcomes and encouraging students to reflect on their learning. Constructive feedback allows learners to take control of their assessment by making them active participants during the process. [Forbes \(2022\)](#) posited that finding the right balance between professionally helpful and personally hurtful feedback mechanisms can be complicated.

The learners must use their metacognitive abilities to become creative thinkers who can be reliant on using their critical thinking skills ([Ajibade and Hayes, 2020](#)). Therefore, it is argued that assessment should be directed towards the learner's needs rather than the curriculum per se. In this case, learners are required to become abstract thinkers to fulfil the learning outcomes. [Hattie and Timperley \(2007\)](#) evidenced that effective feedback answers three questions; "feed up", which is "where am I going", "feed back", which is "how am I going" and "feed forward", which is "where to next". This was further explored by [Hattie et al. \(2021\)](#), that "feed up" compares the actual status with a target status, "feed back", by comparing the actual status to the previous status. Also, "feed forward" by explaining the target status based on the actual situation to enable the student to meet the assignment's target. In their research, [Kelly et al. \(2021\)](#) posited that staff and students were unfamiliar with the word "feedforward". The concept of feedback is seen as a continuous process of supporting learners during their course of study and beyond in the form of feedforward and feed-up, respectively ([Hounsell et al., 2008](#)).

Research shows that students relate more to oral feedback ([Black and McCormick, 2010](#)) and those recorded in video form ([Merry and Orsmond, 2008](#)) than written ones. [Winstone and Boud \(2020\)](#) posited that video, screencast and audio feedback are more authentic approaches. There are various schools of thought as regards how assessment feedback ought to be given. In terms of pragmatic execution, feedback should discuss only a few things that the student did well, highlight all areas the student needs improvement on and elaborate on the required learning skills for the students to improve their knowledge ([Eraut, 2006](#); [Spalding, 2020](#); [Evans, 2013](#)). However, due to the anxiety related to feedback, students are more fearful when accessing their results. This increased anxiety and fear of failing raises students' confusion ([Malone and Sutch, 2019](#); [Hayes, 2018](#)).

Methodology

The methodology for this research is qualitative research with an interpretive phenomenology approach where participants narrated the story of their lived experience, enabling the researcher to explore the data collected from the participants and add their interpretation. A British psychologist, Jonathan Smith ([Smith, 1996, 2004](#)) and his colleagues introduced the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method in the early 1990s. This involves a dual interpretation process, also known as double hermeneutics, because the researcher tries to interpret the participant's experiences by making sense of them ([Smith et al., 2009](#); [Smith and Osborn, 2003](#)), which involves both the researched and the researcher.

The interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) posits that the researcher's interaction with their previous conception and the current experiential encounters is of note ([Heidegger, 1927/2011](#)). Heidegger contemplates that IPA researchers should be heedful of their own experiences and beliefs to enhance their interpretation so as not to impede making sense of the participant's experiences but be reflexive instead. There is still limited knowledge of the student's awareness of feedback and its contribution to their acceptance of feedback leading to improved performance ([Van der Kleij and Lipnevich, 2021](#)). [Jonsson \(2013\)](#), [Smith and Lipnevich \(2018\)](#) doubted the methodological quality of the studies examining students' perception of feedback. [Jonsson \(2013\)](#) reviewed 103 studies about students' use of feedback; the authors used interviews and surveys, while only two used a different method: talk-aloud protocols. Therefore, there is a need to attempt a different method of data collection on the topic, hence the use of LEGO Serious Play in the data collection for this research.

James and Brookfield (2004) posit that LEGO enables individuals to construct metaphorical and symbolic structures that signify snags, explanations, solutions, answers and other aspects of ambiguity. This is to improve staff engagement and imagination, including playfulness in meetings. Using metaphors empowers LEGO to become a powerful tool in solving problems. Kestly (2014) highlighted the concept of 'thinking with your fingers', where the physical processes of creation facilitate reflection and the interpersonal neurology of play. She examines the subcortical motivational systems in the brain which symbolises that the largest part of the brain supplies the hands, and the motor and sensory parts of the brain values the hands above other parts of the brain as in primitive cortical homunculus; hence "Play" uses the "hand-mind" dynamic (Burgi et al., 2005).

Scoping exercise

The researcher performed a scoping exercise with 85 students from four cohorts (20, 30, 15 and 20 of students respectively) by asking them to write a 200 words narrative of their experience of recent assessment feedback they received from nursing research and theory and practice modules. This was in direct response to several emails received from the student cohorts regarding the clarity of feedback being provided to them. The first author was the programme leader and used these narratives to improve how feedback was given by arranging sessions with the nursing academic team to improve clarity. This led to organising meetings with individual students to clarify any doubts about the feedback received. Consequently, more than 90% (77) of the students found understanding the feedback received from the scoping exercise challenging. Therefore, this impacts the potential positive effect the feedback might have had on the student's progress. The above shows that the number of students who do not find feedback valuable in the scoping exercise is more than those that think it's a fair process. Following on from the scoping exercise, it was evident that there were some translational and interpretational issues with the feedback received. In their scoping review, Van der Kleij and Lipnevich (2021) reviewed 164 studies, 91 used surveys, 40 used interviews and 31 used focus group exercises. This prompted the researcher to develop the research question to further investigate the students' lived experience of assessment feedback.

Settings

The setting is an HE institution in London with a population of more than 2000 students from all over the world with various backgrounds and experiences. The institution offers courses ranging from Business, Accounting and Finance, Tourism and Hospitality, Health and Social care, Nursing and Public Health.

Sampling

Purposive sampling (Gray, 2018) was used for this research by selecting samples from current students who have just had their results of the first semester assignments, followed by the scoping exercise. The sample for this research is undergraduate nursing students on a year top-up Nursing degree who are in the first semester of their programme corresponding to years 1 and 2 of a BSc degree. The total number of participants is sixteen (n-16). The participants are between the ages of 22 and 45, originally from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Britain, India and the Philipines; they comprise females and males.

LEGO® Serious Play® as method

A concise presentation of the process of the LEGO® Serious Play® was delivered before the commencement of the focus group exercise, including the step-by-step guide of the process structure followed by the use of the bricks to create visible 3-D that represent thoughts, reflections and ideas. I then asked the participants to pick 3 LEGO Bricks and stack them together to represent what a family meant to them. Each participant put the bricks together and shared what a family represents to them. It was fascinating to them as each person told their story, and each participant was asked questions about what each brick represents in the form of a reflection (Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014; Gauntlett, 2007).

LEGO® Serious Play® as a data collection method

The data collection method uses the LEGO® Serious Play® method ([Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014](#); [Ajibade and Hayes, 2022](#)) by selecting 4 to 6 participants into a focus group. This is where the researcher poses the question, and the participants build their story through LEGO bricks. This was audio recorded, and pictures of the built models were taken. Three research questions were proposed: the students' perception of assessment feedback they recently received, their understanding of the feedback, their perception of how feedback should be given and any obstacles and barriers they experienced in taking the feedback forward to their next assignment. I facilitated the LEGO® Serious Play® with another lecturer and ran the sessions from September to November 2019 targeting the April 2019 intake of nursing students. The participants were composed of mixed nationalities, including home, European Union (EU) and international students. I conducted three focus group sessions, and each of the sessions lasted about two hours.

Four core processes of a LEGO® Serious Play®

The four core processes of LEGO® Serious Play® which are posing the question, construction, sharing and reflection were used in this research, which enabled the participants to tell their story through the LEGO bricks, making the story authentic. The process is as follows.

Posing the questions

I posed the research questions at this stage, and the participants were asked to build their stories to respond to the questions. The research questions are.

RQ1. How do you feel about the last assessment feedback?

RQ2. What are the obstacles and barriers to understanding the feedback given to you?

RQ3. How do you think feedback should be given? What do you think feedback should include?

Construction

The participants used the LEGO bricks provided to build a 3-D model to respond to the question asked, thereby inspiring the use of metaphor to tell their story through the model constructed. This also aids the construction of new knowledge in their minds.

Sharing

Participants are encouraged to share their stories with the team based on the model constructed, free from other participants' interruptions so their voices can be heard. This helps contribute to the data and builds a commitment to shared action.

Reflection

The other participants reflect on the story and the model at this stage. Both the participants and the facilitator can ask clarifying questions about the models, but they cannot question the view of the person that built the model. At this stage, the facilitator summarises surprises and connections ([Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014](#)).

The above enabled 100% respect because you cannot alter someone else's model, communicate through the model, do not question the person who built the model and listen to every story ([Kristiansen and Rasmussen, 2014](#); [Gauntlett, 2007](#)).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethical committee in compliance with the university ethics policy. The participant information sheet was given to participants before requesting their consent to participate in the research ([Gray, 2018](#)). The research participant's autonomy ([Beauchamp and Childress, 2019](#)) was observed, and they were informed of their freedom to opt in or out of the research if they desired to do so. Consideration was given to the benefit of the study for future students, including the current ones depending on the outcome of the research. Every effort was taken to reduce any harm to the participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising the participants with pseudonyms, and the data were kept secure and encrypted in compliance with [GDPR \(2018\)](#).

Credibility, rigour, confirmability and transferability

The research used an interpretive phenomenological approach to analyse the collected data; this was supported by using gamification. The data were collected from various participants from different ethnic backgrounds, including international students and British home students, therefore, ensuring the rigour and credibility of the research. It is essential to mention that the results of this research are transferable to other HE sectors (Forero et al., 2018).

Data analysis method

Thematic analysis was implemented in this research by transcribing the recorded audio story to answer the research questions. A five-step approach postulated by Bazeley and Jackson (2013) was employed by transcribing the data by typing them into a document, noticing by reading and reflecting to become familiar with the text, and three times to understand the data more. The data were explored and played in the third stage to generate themes and subthemes. The latter enabled familiarisation with the data to understand the in-depth meaning of the lived experience of the participants to make sense of their personal and social world and echoes with the use of LSP (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Smith, 2010). This leads to a dense description of the experience and interpretation (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012) in the co-construction of knowledge. The fourth stage is code and connects, achieved by coding the transcribed data, coding the main themes and subthemes and looking at the connections between the codes. The last stage is review and refine, where coding of each case leads to the emergence of new codes leading to modification, elimination and merging of current codes. The data were analysed using quirkos (Turner, 2016) software, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS).

Results

Quirkos enabled the generation of salient themes rather than common themes to answer the questions posed. The generated themes are feedback as a driver for success and progression (Learning Optimisation), enhancing Feedback Clarity: A pathway to improved essay grades, effective assignment preparation and planning, overcoming barriers to student understanding and enhancing academic success through effective student-lecturer interaction.

Theme one – feedback as a driver for success and progression (Learning Optimisation)

Feedback should be clear and understandable. The participants found clear feedback to be effective in progressing to the next level and achieving good results.

Reflections on feedback quality and its impact

The data presents the participants' diverse perspectives and experiences in relation to the feedback received on their assignments. They expressed various thoughts and emotions concerning the feedback they were given, which includes both positive and negative aspects. The participants share their unique perspectives on the feedback received. Some participants acknowledged they are too repetitive, which may have caused a downturn in their grades leading to frustration.

To my feedback, I think that there's a platform, and I've had too much input, with too much repetition, and which I didn't have to, repeats, repeats, repeating one word, one statement (P1)

Some noted that they expected a higher mark in their assignments and value the feedback and feel this will help them improve on their future submissions.

Regarding the feedback that I got from my recent assignments, there was a little bit of ups and downs regarding the marks, I was expecting more in some of the marks than what I got, but there is room for improvement. Some of the feedback that I got was alright, I was able to like get it (P2)

As per my feedback, I can understand all of the things that I need to improve (P4)

Some of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their feedback, highlighting issues with the critique and referencing in their work but others reflected on receiving feedback that is fair but describes it as not too brilliant from a teacher they considered more competent than them. They mention a grey area in certain aspects of their referencing that the teacher

identified.

the feedback I had from the teacher who is on top here. Not too brilliant, but I think it was a fair feedback. This foundation here which is the Grey, there was a grey area in certain aspects of my referencing, which they did see (P5)

The feedback I got looking back on the feedback, is like I did more of the work but most of it was very, very descriptive rather than critiquing (P15)

Some participants find the feedback motivating and encouraging, pushing them to engage in further discussions and reading to move forward and acknowledging the need to improve communication with their supervisor.

I looked at it, and the feedback given to me; it's for me to encourage me to move on and also to move on and get more reading discussions with my colleagues. Like I've mentioned before, Barrier is the descriptive I was describing instead of critiquing my module. So in this aspect, now I have to, I do actually understand the feedback very well (P7)

The feedback was fair enough. It shows that's really I accept it that I didn't communicate with my supervisor at all (P10)

A participant understands the straightforward feedback but hopes for clearer and more unambiguous feedback to facilitate understanding and corrections.

I understand the feedback. And the feedback is straightforward. But I think the feedback should actually be this yellow one, like this, straightforward. no ambiguity. Just there so that it's easy for someone to understand and make corrections (P12)

Determination and aspirations for academic improvement

The data collected research reflects the aspirations and thoughts different participants regarding their academic performance and improvement. The student's express eagerness to surpass in the second semester as indicated below

And that's why I'm actually looking forward to in this second semester, looking forward to improve in everything that I'll be doing so that I can get good grades and improve. Be where I want to be which is the top. So next assignment, I'm looking forward to getting very good marks, and I won't be disappointed (P2)

Some students demonstrated a positive attitude towards improving their overall performance while some acknowledge the importance of learning from their past mistakes and feedback to work on specific areas, such as their introduction, referencing and differentiating between descriptive and critical analysis, see below quotes.

And the introduction part was not really encouraging because I didn't take it seriously. So I've learned my lesson. My feedback is to work on my referencing. I wish, of course, I'm working towards this by the grace to hope to get a good grade next time (P6)

So it's for me now to really differentiate now. Go further to differentiate between descriptive and critiquing as to get to the top (P7)

The feedback acts as a driver for their efforts to attain good grades and endeavour for top academic achievements. The participants recognise the value of being starting assignments on time, organised and making step-by-step progress towards achieving their academic goals.

according to my last feedback, shows me that with a lot of effort step by step, I'll get there (P10)

I should start on time, well organised and arranged properly to get to get on top (P13)

if I work on the next assignment, I will be able to improve. Well, overall, I appreciate my grades (P15)

Largely, there is evidence of an expression of gratitude for their grades and a commitment to improve further by working diligently.

Perceptions and mixed emotional responses to feedback and academic performance

The participant's responses reflect the diverse range of emotions and diverse perceptions regarding the feedback they received on their recent assignments and exam results. Some participants expressed disappointment with some of the grades received, expecting higher scores in certain areas.

Regarding the feedback that I got from my recent assignments, there was a few ups and downs regarding the marks; I was expecting more in some of the marks than what I got . . . But some of the marks were a little bit disappointing (P2)

They identify barriers in grammar as significantly impacting their performance, along with the need to work on their critique and organisation. However, there are also insurances of encouragement and impetus to read more and improve represented by the colours yellow and white.

but the times and grammar it will cut on all of my scores. So it is a very big barrier for me and the second thing is to critique all of the things so it is also the second barrier and organisation also make the low score (P4)

And therefore, even though I was hoping in the yellow for a better results, I got a pass mark, or about a little bit above, but the white one is telling me that I can do better (P5)

Participants expresses varying degrees of surprise, confusion and acceptance with their marks especially when analysing their feedback and results while having no prior expectations of the grades but disregard the emotional impact of the feedback later.

So when I saw it, is this my mark or something. I was a bit confused but later on, I just forgot about it (P11)

Yeah, I haven't seen my feedback yet. But with the marks, its a bit disappointing anyway. I did not expect any of the grades (P9)

The data demonstrates a mix of feelings and perceptions regarding the assessment outcomes and the potential for improvement in their academic journey.

Theme two—enhancing feedback clarity: a pathway to improved essay grades

The participants opined that feedback should be clear, concise comprehensible. They assumed it should guide students in the right direction to improve their essays for better grades.

Effective feedback and supportive learning environment

The data showcases various views of different participants concerning the significance of clear and fathomable feedback and its impact on their learning experiences. Participants expressed that there is a need for open communication and discussions among students and university lecturers.

So if you want to take the success, you need to take more people to communicate with each other. I think the matter of the feedback is there like we need to use one to one, we need to, we need one room further like we can discuss all about the criteria, we can get as many of things like the, in the feedback like majority thinks we don't understand (P4)

And if that is clear enough with this little one, I should be able to get to the top (P5)

The participants suggested the creation of an environment where the students can access feedback and support without the necessity to rely solely on direct interactions with lecturers.

I know if we actually seek for that explanation from the lecturers with the feedback, we'll get it but let it be in a way that you don't need to go to the lecturer to understand it (P12)

Participants recognise the significance of a fair assessment with self-reflection, and identifying areas for improvement.

I understood it is fair for me to also reflect on what I've done wrong, where I need to improve, which I hope to do (P13)

Some participants expressed the urge for personalised discussion sessions with lecturers, thereby allowing for constructive feedback about weaknesses and ways to enhance their work.

I think the lecturer should invite each student to office or wherever to discuss the feedback and tell the person his or her weaknesses, and how to improve and give the reasonable and tangible support (P14)

The data also reveal a need for straightforward feedback that provides significant insight guidance and prioritises students' progress.

The feedback, like most people, have said, it just needs to be straightforward (P15)

The feedback needs to really take an important part of student progress. So it needs to be very, very, very good, prioritise to see tutors . . . always available to see us and spend some plenty of time with us, so the student might learn from their mistakes (P16)

Furthermore, there is a need for accurate orientation on the content of essays and expectations for critiquing to evade confusion.

I'm not being made aware that most of the essays that we're going to be writing is going to behave to be critiquing (P2)

The importance of effective feedback and supportive learning environments in facilitating students' academic progress and growth was highlighted.

Divergent perspectives on feedback expectations and clarity

A single participant expresses differing perspectives on feedback by highlighting disappointment about their expected marks by believing that their effort should have merited higher grades. They acknowledge the variation between their expectations and the marker's evaluation and emphasised this as a learning process involved in understanding learning. The participant opined that feedback should be self-explanatory, direct and clear advocated avoidance of ambiguous language and preferred feedback that is straightforward and to the point.

Well, no one knows it all, for what I did, and the effort that I put I was expecting I should be able to get more marks, but based on what the marker think is completely different from what I think so that's the essence of learning (P2)

Feedback should be self explanatory. We don't have to be beating around the bush calling a spade a spade to get feedback. It should be like on point (P2)

Theme three—effective assignment preparation and planning

The data provides insights into the views and reflections of the participants with regards to feedback and academic preparation.

Perceptions of learning and improvement: feedback and academic preparation

Participants indicate the need for organised self-management and step-by-step progress in achieving academic success.

So I need to, you know, I just arranged myself properly, and then take a step by step and the climate, until I get there (P1)

Some participants acknowledge their performance as satisfactory and may not reflect their abilities but strive to improve further. They recognise the importance of continuous learning

and updates.

I did well but not to the best of my knowledge, my ability . . . I didn't get much time to update that. And therefore, I acknowledge that (P5)

So this time around, I need to work on it so that at the end, I will get a good mark (P6)

Feedback plays a crucial role in guiding participants to understand the difference between critiquing and descriptive styles and the use of appropriate referencing patterns.

The feedback given is for me to read and understand the difference between the critiquing, and descriptive describing so that's what I have to do for now (P7)

It's there, you understand what it is, you understand that you should use, Harvard referencing, or more of this, and there should be room for that explanation (P12)

Another participant stressed a lack of prior information that impact their performance but now realised the importance of assignment requirements.

Now that I know that most of our assignment is going to be all about critiquing, this was not the information that we have, the information that I lacked in this past assignment, and actually affected the score (P2)

Participants understand the value of feedback in the promotion of better preparation and guiding their learning to excel in future assignments and exams.

The feedback was, I need more preparation for going forwards with my assignment and exams, So there's room for improvements to dedicate more time to my work (P8)

The data also highlights the obligation for clear explanations in feedback. The data also reinstate clearer explanations from the lecturers about the marking standards. Participants highlight the significance of adopting a patient and systematic approach instead of lastminute preparations.

need to have a lot of patience, preparation and observation and listening and communication with our tutors and the programme leaders about our preparation. always read a lot of systematic review and research (P16)

The only thing is knowing that the lecturers know, the standard with which they are marking, as my colleague said they should explain it well and vividly so that there wouldn't be much information demanded from them again (P5)

But I think the first assignment we did, there were a lot of grey areas, we are not sure what to do (P12)

Theme four—overcoming barriers to student understanding

The data reflects the challenges faced by the participants about feedback, and their desire for well-structured, understandable and explicit feedback. Thereby, highlighting the significance of clear and straightforward feedback to reduce confusion.

Addressing challenges and improving communication

Participants expressed a desire for feedback that is self-explanatory which leaves no room for confusion. They emphasise the need to avoid vagueness and to provide feedback that is on point, concise and easily understandable.

Feedback should be self-explanatory. We don't have to be beating around the bush, calling a spade a spade to get feedback . . . It should be like on point . . . but some of the feedback wasn't quite straightforward (P2)

So the feedback to me should be straightforward, clearer and then I mean, on point on the right (P9)
Some participants note challenges in the comprehension of feedback, predominantly when

criteria and explanations are not well-defined. They advocate the importance of detailed feedback that not only points out errors but also explains why errors occurred and provide guidance for improvement.

I'm a bit worried about regards to the referencing, where and what I did, it says you're referencing, it doesn't explain more about how was the referencing I did wrong. So moving forward, what is expected is if it is on this line that I have not maybe performed well if it's stated, then I know exactly what I'm being asked to do in my next test or my last work (P5)

The data reveals participants' concerns regarding feedback being overly analytical or sometimes lacking in clarity. They stress the importance of feedback being explicit, well explanatory and aligned with the criteria.

with what I saw in the Canvas, again, is different from what Mr. xxxxx told me, I was kind of, what is this? Am I not organised? Or is it the school that is not organised or something like that . . . More indepth, meaning you should have included this, this this this, for example (P11)

like we can discuss all the criteria, we can get as many of things like the, in the feedback like majority things we don't understand (P4)

The participants emphasise the need for feedback that effectively addresses their queries, guides them in their academic journey and encourages transparent communication between students and educators without barriers in understanding.

In terms of the feedback, I think the feedback should be well explanatory (P7)

As you can see from my feedback, I have 'red' here, which indicates danger. Yes, that's the downside of the feedback . . . I agreed with my colleagues; that there should be a human feeling too; feedback shouldn't be something that they can just shuffle over that paper (P8)

analysing our feedback, where there are some barriers to have to understand clearly the barriers (P17)

Navigating research challenges and key influences on academic improvement

The participant reflects on confronting obstacles while conducting research. They remark on facing difficulties in accessing necessary resources and expressed being frustrated with the university's search engine, which doesn't provide desired results even when materials appear to be available.

But I think I had barriers like around the resources I needed to have used and that the Discover discovery (university search engine) that they do I need to push through because it doesn't really give you what you want to ask, you search for something, you see the material is available but you can't really access it (P12)

Another participant emphasises the substantial influence of tutor support and access to research articles on the process of improvement.

a lot of research and articles and the tutor support is a very major impact on that is important to improve (P16)

Theme five—enhancing academic success through effective student-lecturer interaction

The participants commended the support from lecturers in one-to-one sessions after assessment feedback. They believed this should be the norm. They asserted that this had helped them in their academics because the lecturers were able to answer their questions and clarify any of their doubts.

Exploring one-to-one interactions with lecturers

The participants expressed a desire for individualised support and clarification of concepts, indicating that direct communication with educators can have a positive impact on their understanding and performance. One of the participants indicated the need for the students

to meet with lecturers to ask questions and seek advice, emphasising the belief that such interactions can contribute to their success.

And I need to also meet with my lecturers to ask questions, for them to put me through and also see my other colleagues. To help me so that I can be more successful (P3)

Another participant highlights the need to book an appointment with a tutor after realising the importance of understanding the introductory material thoroughly.

because I got clearly in the loads what are in the intro note, I need to book an appointment with the tutor okay (P4)

Some of the participants suggest the idea of arranging one-on-one sessions with supervisors or lecturers, proposing that these discussions could lead to better understanding and clearer explanations.

which means that we can have one-to-one at a point with the teacher with the lecturer so as to have a one to one, maybe for five minutes to 10 minutes for more explanation (P7)

if it's organised for the student to come to do lectures. I know that is difficult, but the arrangement can be made and a face to face will be good (P8)

But maybe in case of next time, the supervisor, the lecturer, she will arrange a one-to-one maybe 10 minutes for each student so that it will be more explainable (P6)

Participant P8 emphasised the potential challenges of organising face-to-face meetings with lectures but still values the benefits of such interactions for effective learning.

A participant envisages a situation where feedback is provided during one-on-one sessions, permitting students to ask questions and receive direct responses from their supervisors or lecturers.

For me, if the feedback is given only 30 minutes, where the supervisor or the lecturers have one to one . . . the student will be able to ask questions, and the lecturer will be able to answer (P10)

There is a desire for more time to engage with tutors, teachers and program leaders, demonstrating a belief in the value of in-depth discussions about their work.

I have more time and to do and ask the teachers support and tutor and the programme leader to have some appointment and proper discussion about my work (P16)

The above quotes underscore the participants' strong interest in personalised interactions with educators in enhancing their learning experience and academic performance.

Collaborative learning and peer communication: catalysts for academic progress
The participants believed communicating with peers during assessment preparation would help clarify some simple confusion. They found it helpful to communicate and get feedback from each other to provide a space where they feel supported and understood and bring complex queries to the lecturer if required. They underscored the significance of peer communication and shared learning in the context of academic success.

Participants highlight that success is dependent upon communication within peer groups. They highlight the importance of interaction and communication among students in the achievement of success.

Without the communication with each other and peer groups. You don't do the success, If you want to get the success then you want to more communicate with each one in the my first script (P4)

Another participant opined that feedback is a form of encouragement and a motivation for them to participate in more reading discussions with colleagues. Therefore, peer interactions

play an important role in promoting their academic growth.

I looked at it and the feedback given to me, it's for me to encourage me to move on and also to move on and get more reading discussion with my colleagues (P7)

Some of the participants are in favour of collaborative learning among students. They believed that students can gain a deeper understanding by discussing ideas with peers rather than exclusively relying on individual interactions with teachers. They referenced a particular instance where a classmate provided additional insights, strengthening the value of peer contributions.

Students should also be with their colleagues to get the understanding rather than everyone going to see the teacher for a one to one . . . So in which I think I did with my co friend, xxxxxxxx, explain some more details for me as well (P15)

It is indicated above that participants recognise the beneficial role of peer interactions and group discussions for academic advancement.

Discussion

Feedback has positive and negative impacts on students' progression and attainment, which concomitantly affects retention. Clear and straightforward feedback free from ambiguity enables the student to understand what is expected of them to improve their work. Data were collected using the LEGO Serious Play method to facilitate story-making through personal storytelling and metaphor by building a 3-D model resulting in developing themes to inform the results. The result was further strengthened with the use of LEGO Serious Play which enabled the participants to think through their fingers, as postulated by [Kestly \(2014\)](#). Feedback could have both positive and negative impacts on the student and this was supported by [Harvard Business School \(2013\)](#) which postulates that feedback should be meaningfully positive and 'start small' by giving positive feedback every day by acknowledging any behaviour that needs encouragement. This causes feedback to be essential in the higher education system. There are different perspectives on feedback, as postulated in the results of the data collected, which includes feedback as a driver for success and progression (Learning Optimisation), enhancing feedback clarity: A pathway to improved essay grades, effective assignment preparation and planning, overcoming barriers to student understanding and enhancing academic success through effective student-lecturer interaction. [Hattie and Timperley \(2007\)](#) supported the above assertion that effective feedback answers three questions: feed up, feedback and feed-forward.

Participants admitted that feedback acts as a powerful catalyst for their learning optimisation. They recognise the impact of constructive feedback in providing insights into their strengths and weaknesses and enabling them to upgrade their academic skills. The student's perception of feedback plays a significant role in their learning ([Havnes et al., 2012](#)). Feedback can induce a range of emotional responses from students, thereby influencing the perceptions of their academic performance. Positive feedback reinforces a sense of accomplishment, while constructive criticism may trigger mixed emotions. [University of Greenwich \(2023\)](#) discusses feedback as a dialogue that allows learners to take control of their assessment by making them active participants during the process. The process of receiving feedback urges students to engage actively with the course content and strive continuously for improvement. Therefore, effective feedback should clarify what is a good performance, facilitate reflection and self-assessment, encourage positive motivational beliefs and promote self-esteem and provide opportunities to close the gap ([University of Greenwich, 2023](#); [Mamoon-Al-Bashir et al., 2016](#)).

Varying viewpoints were expressed by the participants on the quality of feedback received. While some appreciate the receipt of detailed and actionable feedback, others identify some room for improvement in relation to clarity and specificity. The effect of feedback on their academic journey is evident as students evaluate their performance, identify areas for growing and modify their study strategies appropriately. The feedback

should allow the student to understand the actual status and compare it with the target status (feed up), compare the actual status with the previous status (feedback) and explain the target status based on the actual status (feed forward) (Hattie et al., 2021). This is supported by Gamlem and Smith (2013), who proposed that feedback should be specific and self-explanatory and directed at the assessment criteria that they are being assessed against. The participant believed that non-specific feedback causes more confusion for the students than giving a direction to achieve a good grade. This was supported by Shute (2008), who opined that feedback should be specific and clear, accompanied by feedback messages. The latter further stated that feedback should focus on the task and not the learner and provide detailed feedback that should be achievable. Hattie (2011) further posited that feedback strategies ranked 10th out of 150 substantial factors that enhance student outcomes.

The strategies for effective assignment preparation and planning are essential for enhancing students' learning and how well they perform. This theme focused on the preparatory stage of assignments and the impact it has on academic success. In his work on Visible learning for teachers (Hattie, 2011), Hattie believed that formative assessment should be part of assessment preparation as it enables students' progress or its dearth to be monitored. Furthermore, formative assessment doubles the student's learning rate (Black and Wiliam, 2010). The data collected suggested that feedback was focused on those tasks that they needed to improve on. Therefore, effective feedback makes the learner reflect and learn from their mistakes. John Hattie in Sutton et al. (2011) further stated that the use of "praise" in feedback positively improves students' performance. This was supported by Hattie et al. (2021) that "praise" is more effective in a summative assessment than a formative one.

The participants frequently encounter barriers that hinder their thorough interpretation of feedback. Cambridge assessment international education (2022) opined that task-focused feedback enables students to work harder than person-focused one. The participants complained of barriers to understanding feedback and said that feedback should be on point and discuss what they did wrong, why it was not right and how to make it right. Turnitin (2015) reports that barriers include a comment that doesn't link to the student's assignment aim, sometimes very general or too many comments. This makes students read feedback more than they can apply in their future work or understand.

To provide personalised support and clarity of feedback, students feel that one-to-one interactions between students and lecturers are essential. This explores the benefits of individualised interactions, the influence on students' understanding and the impact of these discussions on academic improvement. Reddy et al. (2015) reported five significant feedback barriers: teachers factors, learner factors, feedback content and educational process. The participasights into the views and reflections of thnts believed they find it more beneficial for the lecturers to meet them one-on-one to discuss the feedback because they understand it better, and it will allow them to ask clarifying questions about their feedback. Students that do this have a better improvement in their future marks. The use of audio feedback in summative assessments is still underutilised in the HE sector. Therefore, it is recommended that audio and video recording for feedback could improve students' understanding because it enhances the connection between the marker and the students and makes the students more engaged with feedback (Merry and Orsmond, 2008; Winstone and Boud, 2020).

The findings of this research clarify the important role of feedback in students' journey and provide awareness into approaches for improving students' learning experience and success.

Limitation of the study

One of the limitations of this study was the small number of participants involved. The study could have included a range of students at different levels up to the third year.

Implication to practice

The implication of this research to practice includes careful use of these results in facilitating feedback to improve students' grades. The importance of constructive assessment feedback that is forward-looking, task-oriented and aligned with the assessment criteria was emphasised.

Clear and definite feedback.

Feedback should be clear and straight to the point to enable the student to understand what is expected of them to make necessary improvements to their work.

Feedback aligned with evaluation standard.

Feedback should be specific, instructive and focused on the assessment criteria that they are being assessed against.

Task focus.

Feedback should focus on the task and not the learner.

Sandwich technique.

Feedback should start with a positive, followed by areas of improvement and close with a positive note (Reddy et al., 2015).

Feedforward.

This enables the student to understand the 'target status' of how they could improve on the assessment.

Structured and adequate.

Feedback should be structured and not contain too much information. It should direct the students to the universities library skills learning website. See [Appendix](#) below for the feedback template I developed prior to this project which was evaluated and validated for use. This has been used since then, and the feedback received indicated that it makes assessment feedback easy to give and straightforward. The feedback from the students shows that the assessment template makes them understand the lecturer's comments and it gives them the opportunity for a feed forward.

In-person discussion.

Lecturers could arrange a short meeting with students that scored low marks to clarify the areas of improvement. This allows the student to ask clarifying questions.

Assessment tutorial.

Pre-submission assessment tutorial will be beneficial to the students.

Audio or video feedback.

The use of audio or visual feedback engages the student more than written feedback. This is currently underutilised across the sector.

Practical implications

The results of this study will benefit other groups because the sample is a mixture of participants from different backgrounds, cultures and countries, including Britain, Europe, Asia and Africa. While researching this topic, there are similarities in the experience of students from various backgrounds. This supports the idea that the results of qualitative research enable transferability. Therefore, the results of the research could be implemented in any country where students undergo assessment.

Implication to local higher education institute policymakers

The results of this research have a significant impact on context specific Higher Education Institutional Policymakers who can use this study in the following ways.

Workload allocation.

The Higher Education sector needs to review its workload policies to accommodate individual tutorials for students.

International students.

International students should be considered in their policy and organise bespoke sessions to bring them up to speed with the current standard of educational requirements in the country.

Universal feedback template.

Institutions should introduce a universally acceptable feedback template to their university that makes feedback consistent across the university to give an equitable experience to all students.

Assessment criteria and brief.

There should be uniformity in the approach to assessment criteria and brief. While some courses have a broad assessment brief, others should not have a limited or small brief. The assessment criteria should be very clear and not confusing. Assessment criteria should be introduced at the start of the module, midpoint and some weeks before the end of the module.

Assessment timeline.

The programme should be organised to systematically give students adequate time to complete their essays. Each module should consider a timeframe for introducing the assessment criteria or brief. However, the gap between module delivery and assignment submission should not be too wide, so the student does not lose grip on what is taught in the module.

Discussion group.

The use of the discussion group function in the university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) should be encouraged. This should be provided in the module space where students can discuss with each other and be overseen by the lecturer.

Journal subscriptions.

The universities should have adequate journal subscriptions. The universities should have a system in place where resources not accessible through their journal subscriptions could be made available without delay to the student's time.

Annotation of essays.

While there are debates about essay annotation while marking, universities should decide what is best for their students. Annotated feedback could help clarify feedback issues as this enables the student to know exactly where things are not right and what to do to put them right.

Implications for further research

There is a need for further research on the decolonisation of the curriculum to consider students from an international background, deprived and disadvantaged students. Further studies are required on the impact of audio and video feedback on students' progression.

Conclusion

The impact of feedback in shaping and influencing students' academic journey and promoting learning optimisation cannot be exaggerated. This thorough study examined various themes and subthemes related to feedback, its clarity, assignment preparation, overcoming barriers, and key influences on academic improvement. The findings emphasise the multilayered nature of feedback and its critical role in advancing students' learning experience and academic success.

The study provided an awareness of the significance of assessment feedback in students' progression and attainment, focussing on university students. Research showed that feedback plays a significant role in students' overall final grades at the end of their course (Lipnevich and Smith, 2008). There are different views about assessment feedback, including but not limited to causing more confusion than direction for the students if not done systematically Mamoon-Al-Bashir et al. (2016). Learners' fortitude and ambitions for academic improvement are deeply entwined with the constructive feedback they receive which drives them towards excellence. The mixed emotional responses to feedback and academic performance signify the complex interaction between emotions, perceptions and feedback, thereby shaping the students' overall learning experience. The use of audio or video-enhanced feedback is deemed more engaging than writing feedback.

Furthermore, a supportive learning environment increases students' understanding and contributes to better essay grades. The study emphasises the paramount role of feedback and its multifaceted impact on student's academic journey. The perceptions gotten from this inquiry provide a foundation for increasing feedback practices, overcoming barriers, upgrading assignment preparation strategies and optimising student-lecturer collaborations. While lecturers and institutions endeavour for continuous improvement in the learning process, the findings of this study offer valuable directions to generate a more supportive, communicative and effective educational environment which eventually contributes to the holistic development and success of students.

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