Abstract
This paper discusses part of a research project on effective student feedback carried out with staff and students in the Faculty of Business, Law and Sport at the University of Winchester. An online questionnaire was used to explore students’ perspectives on the practical aspects of feedback delivery, such as timeliness, legibility and feedback format, as well as students’ use of and engagement with feedback. The findings indicate that legibility of hand-written feedback remains a problem for a substantial minority of students. Students generally considered feedback timely only when it was returned within two weeks. Individual verbal feedback was considered the most effective way of ensuring students’ engagement with feedback, even though many students’ preference was written feedback.

Introduction
Feedback has long been considered a crucial part of student learning and remains a regular subject of academic research (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Price et al., 2010). Various studies have confirmed the importance assigned to feedback by both staff and students, but also show that students are frequently dissatisfied with the feedback they receive. Robinson, Pope and Holyoak (2011, p.2) observe that: Student ratings of satisfaction with feedback are consistently lower than other teaching and learning elements within the UK higher education sector. However, reasons for this dissatisfaction are often unclear to teaching staff, who believe their students are receiving timely, extensive and informative feedback.

This paper is based on a research project initiated by the Learning and Teaching Committee of the University of Winchester’s Faculty of Business, Law and Sport, in response to results in the National Student Survey’s section on Assessment and Feedback. In spite of the successful implementation of various policies for improving the quality, quantity and timeliness of feedback in the faculty, student responses were less positive than expected, especially with regard to the timeliness of feedback and its formative value, confirming the observation of Robinson and colleagues quoted above.

The researcher was asked to explore staff and student perspectives on feedback practice in the faculty. The objective of the research was to investigate their respective views on what constitutes effective feedback and to establish some practical parameters of how feedback should be best delivered to ensure effectiveness. The aim of the research was to develop internal recommendations for effective practice and thereby enhance satisfaction with feedback for both staff and students.

A previous paper (Bohnacker-Bruce, 2011) presented the findings of the first part of the research project, namely academics’ perspectives on effective student feedback. This paper discusses one part of the findings from research with students, namely the results of an online questionnaire, which focused on the practical, or procedural (Robinson, 2011) aspects of feedback delivery, such as timeliness, legibility and feedback format, but also gave students an opportunity to comment more widely on their use...
of, and engagement with, the feedback they receive. Qualitative data from focus group research with students, which further investigated students’ perceptions of effective feedback, is referred to but not fully explored in this paper due to space limitations.

**Methodology**

As required by the University of Winchester’s research policy, the project was approved through departmental ethics procedures. The researcher employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods for the research with students (Miles & Huberman, 1998; Cousin, 2009). Data was collected in three stages, firstly with a pilot focus group, followed by an online questionnaire, and finally with three further student focus groups. Data from the pilot focus group was used to inform the design of the online questionnaire; the data provided by the questionnaire responses was further explored by the final focus groups.

In order to ensure that students had sufficient experience of feedback, participation in the focus groups was limited to students in years two and three, while the questionnaire was open to all students in the faculty, including postgraduate students.

The online questionnaire was devised by the researcher in consultation with two colleagues and revised following input from the pilot focus group. The final version consisted of ten subject questions and 25 Likert-scale statements, plus three socio-demographic questions asking respondents’ gender, year of study and programme studied. The ten subject questions focused on different aspects of feedback, namely types of feedback such as written or verbal (Questions 1 and 2), the timeframe for feedback (Questions 3-6), formats of written feedback (Questions 7-8) and student engagement with feedback (Questions 9-10). All questions required students to select one answer from a range of options. Where appropriate, a comment box inviting more detailed answers was offered, allowing for qualitative contributions. The 25 Likert items also related to the aspects described above, along with additional aspects such as feedback quality and clarity, and were designed to triangulate data from the subject questions.

The questionnaire was posted on SurveyMonkey and the link e-mailed to all students in the faculty (approximately 1,300), and also posted on the student homepage of the university intranet. An incentive of a prize draw for book tokens to the value of £50, £30 and £20 was offered. The survey was open for a period of 5 weeks. The questionnaire responses were automatically compiled by SurveyMonkey.

135 students in the faculty (10.3%) accessed the questionnaire, and 114 (8.7%) completed the questionnaire, with a response from 9.1% of all undergraduate students, and 4.1% of all postgraduate students. 21% of respondents were male and 79% female. 94.8% of respondents were undergraduate students (24.6% from Year 1, 32.5% from Year 2, 37.7% from Year 3), while 4.4% of respondents were postgraduate students. As respondents were self-selecting, representativeness is not guaranteed, however, the number of respondents makes the inclusion of a wide range of student views likely.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Feedback types**

Question 1 asked students how effective they found different types of feedback, with effective feedback defined as feedback “that students engage with and respond to”. The most effective type of feedback was seen to be verbal feedback given to the individual student (i.e. a tutorial), followed by written feedback given to an individual student by email, and written feedback on the cover sheet. Student opinion on other forms of feedback including group feedback on the Learning Network, group feedback in a seminar or lecture, feedback from peers, or discussion of work in groups, was far less conclusive (Table 1).
Table 1: Question 1 - Effectiveness of feedback types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Type</th>
<th>Very effective</th>
<th>Quite effective</th>
<th>Not very effective</th>
<th>Not effective at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written feedback on cover sheet</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group feedback on the Learning Network</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written feedback to student by e-mail</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal feedback to the individual student (e.g. tutorial)</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group feedback in a seminar or lecture</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback from peers or discussion of work in groups</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2 asked students what type of feedback they personally preferred – independently from how effective they considered this type of feedback, as asked in Question 1. 57% of respondents preferred written individual feedback and 41.5% preferred verbal individual feedback.

There could be several reasons why more students preferred written feedback, even though verbal feedback was considered more effective than written feedback in Question 1. While written feedback remains available for future reference, students may be concerned about not being able to correctly and completely remember verbal feedback once some time has passed, even when notes were taken at the time. Furthermore, while verbal feedback may be seen as most effective in terms of learning outcomes, it is potentially an awkward experience for students, particularly if the work to be discussed is of a low standard. Brown (2007) found that students expressed reluctance to approach lecturers regarding feedback. Robinson et al. (2011, p.6) report that nearly 40% of research participants in their study stated that they would arrange a meeting with their personal tutor to discuss their work, which leaves a majority of over 60% not taking this course of action. This may merely be an indication of individual students’ different preferences, but it may also be indicative of variations in practice between individual lecturers, departments and universities. In response to Likert item S1: Lecturers encourage me to discuss my work and the feedback with them face-to-face, 53% of participants in this study agreed with the statement, while about 25% disagreed, which would indicate mixed practice.

Data in this study confirms the importance to many students of the availability of individual verbal feedback, even when students do not actually avail themselves of this opportunity. In the comments section for these questions, most comments emphasised students’ desire for individual verbal feedback, such as this statement: “I think there should be more opportunities to get one-to-one feedback from lecturers.” Where this type of feedback was available, students expressed appreciation, as indicated by this comment: “Having received written feedback for a particular tutorial, I was offered the opportunity to chat through conceptual ideas further. This was most informative and took the feedback/content to another level.”

Clearly, for large cohorts of undergraduates, individual tutorials or other individual verbal feedback would be difficult to accommodate and students are aware of lecturers’ logistical limitations. However, one student suggested: “[Taking into account] the perspective of the lecturers, general feedback in a seminar/lecture would be acceptable if there was an opportunity to discuss on a one–to-one basis for those who wanted it.”

Individual written feedback is seen as effective and is the preferred option for the majority of students. However, for a minority of students whose preferred option is individual verbal feedback, the lack of availability of this is a source of dissatisfaction. Therefore, making individual verbal feedback available is likely to increase overall satisfaction with feedback provision in a cohort of students, even if only a minority of students take advantage of the opportunity.
Timeframe for feedback

Question 3 asked students to select their ideal time frame for feedback on a range of assignments, including mid-module written assignments, presentations, group work assignment and the final assignment.

For mid-module written assignments and group presentations the majority of students considered 1-2 weeks the ideal timeframe to make the feedback most effective, followed by 4-7 days. For final assignments students allowed for a slightly more generous timeframe: while the majority also selected 1-2 weeks, this was followed by 3-4 weeks. For presentations, however, the majority (39%) selected 3 days or fewer and around 30% selected 4-7 days.

While Question 3 focused on the ideal timeframe for effective feedback, Question 4 asked students about an “acceptable and realistic” timeframe, taking into account the needs of both students and staff, and the size of module groups.

The greatest difference in the answers concerned the timeframe for feedback on presentations where the majority (36%) selected 1-2 weeks, with 28% opting for 4-7 days. For mid-module and group assignments the majority of students still opted for 1-2 weeks, however, the second largest groups now chose 2-3 weeks, rather than 4-7 days as for Question 3. For the final assignment 46% selected 2-3 weeks as an acceptable timeframe, followed by 23% for 3-4 weeks.

The critical timeframe of two weeks indicated by these results has been confirmed in other studies, as Brown (2007, p.45) notes:

This study also finds an almost exact agreement from participants with McDonald’s (1991) view of two weeks being the maximum amount of time that students are prepared to wait before receiving feedback... there is a psychological period of time beyond which feedback begins to lose its effect, and...students appear very clear as to what this period of time is.

The next question, Question 5, investigated students’ perception of the actual timeframe for receiving feedback. Faculty guidelines recommend that academic staff mark and return work within 15 working days (3 weeks) but in no more than 20 working days (4 weeks), and statistics from the faculty office confirm that this is achieved for nearly all assignments. More than 90% of students confirmed that the target of three to four weeks is met for group work and mid-module written assignments and nearly 95% for presentations. Final assignments were perceived to take the longest to return, with nearly 20% stating that it took more than four weeks to receive the feedback.

Question 6 asked students after what period of time they thought written feedback becomes irrelevant. A majority of 38% selected the option When the next assignment has been handed in, which had been added at the suggestion of the pilot focus group. 11% of students on the other hand selected Time does not matter. 4% selected 1-2 weeks, 10% 2-3 weeks, 21% 3-4 weeks, and 15% 4-6 weeks. This question drew a number of comments, several of which emphasised the importance students assign to the timeliness of feedback in order to make it effective. One student noted: “Sometimes feedback from one assignment is too late to have a sufficient amount of time to make it effective.” Other comments on this issue included: “Some assignments do come back too late to influence the next one.” and “I think it is important that assignments or at least feedback from them needs to be returned to students before their next assignment is due in order for them to read and work on the areas for improvement highlighted in feedback.”

These comments indicate clearly that students mainly considered the effectiveness of feedback in terms of it informing the next assignment. This perspective was also observed by Price et al.:

Most students, even when they did see the feed-forward function of feedback, took a more short-termist view than staff of the timeframe in which they could apply the feedback. The consequence of this difference was that students often considered feedback from staff to be vague and ambiguous because they
could not immediately apply it to another piece of work. Instead, students were often looking for explicit instructions about how to do better next time, and much feedback did not conform to this wish (Price et al., 2010, p.285).

However, there were also comments that emphasised that quality of feedback was more important than speed:

“It’s better to get clear, useful and individual feedback, even if it takes slightly longer to receive work back with a grade.”

“Granted that lecturers have busy schedules, I still think that feedback on assignments is one of the most crucial aspects of the learning process as it allows for you to assess how well you have understood the module/assignment criteria. Rather than lecturers simply rushing through this process, it should, in fact, be an area that they spend the most time on - we pay them enough after all!”

Finally, there was just one lone sympathetic student voice acknowledging: “I am fully aware of the reason it takes lecturers 3-4 weeks to return feedback and this is fully acceptable”.

Likert statement S20 followed up a suggestion made by the pilot focus group and asked students whether they would accept general feedback to the group in exchange for receiving their grade more quickly. However, 71% of students disagreed with this statement, while only 16% agreed, confirming the importance assigned to individualised feedback.

This data suggests that a central reason why students require quick turnaround for feedback, ideally within two weeks, lies in their narrow interpretation of the purpose of feedback, namely to inform the next assignment. There is then clearly a need to broaden students’ understanding of the purpose and function of feedback, particularly in large undergraduate cohorts where a two-week timeframe for feedback is unrealistic. At the same time, innovative ways of facilitating a speedier turnaround should be explored, for example by taking advantage of new technologies such as voice recognition software, as suggested by Robinson et al. (2011, p.8).

Format and legibility of written feedback

In this section the preferred format and legibility of written feedback was explored. Question 7 asked students: How would you like to receive written feedback? Current practice in the faculty consists of either typed or hand-written feedback on the cover sheet only. The options of Hand-written on relevant sections of assignment and Set out in a table against the marking scheme were added at the suggestion of the pilot focus group. The majority of students (42%) chose Hand-written on relevant sections of assignment as their preferred format, while 25% selected Typed on cover sheet. 13% preferred to receive feedback electronically and 10% would like feedback Set out in a table against the marking scheme. Only 4% opted for Handwritten on cover sheet only, while 6% did not have a preference.

Less than a third of students therefore receive feedback in their preferred format, while the majority of students do not. These results are to an extent surprising, as students generally prefer typed feedback to hand-written feedback, as discussed below. However, an explanation may be the difficulties students described in working out which particular section of their assignment a comment on the cover sheet referred to, which would suggest that a more effective system of cross-referencing these comments to the relevant section of the assignment is needed.

Question 8 addressed the issue of legibility of hand-written feedback, which students frequently raise as a problem. Students were asked whether they were able to read hand-written feedback. Just 7% responded with Yes, handwritten feedback is no problem for me, and a further 62% with Depends on the lecturer but it’s okay most of the time. However, 27% of students stated I struggle quite often to work it out and 4% claimed I usually can’t decipher it. These percentages are in line with other studies, for example Robinson et al. (2011, p.5):
To be useful it is important that feedback can be easily read. The majority of feedback provided to these students is hand-written rather than electronic. Results indicate that 71.1% of our students report that their feedback is always or usually legible. However, this does indicate that approximately 30% (or 50 students) in our sample felt that sometimes the feedback that they receive is not legible, which is of concern.

In the comment section for Question 8 there were several strong statements asking for feedback to be typed, such as the following: “I think that all feedback should be TYPED as I often struggle to understand or read the comments written to me.” In addition there were several unprompted comments on lack of legibility of written feedback in other sections of the questionnaire, which indicate that for some students this is indeed a critical factor in the delivery of feedback. This section was complemented by two Likert items (S2 and S13), which further probed students’ preferences with regard to typed or hand-written feedback. The responses to these two statements initially seem contradictory, as over 77% of students agreed that all feedback should be typed (S2), and yet over 52% also stated that they don’t mind hand-written feedback (S13). One explanation for this inconsistency may be a comment added to these questions, where a student stated: “I have no preference between typed or handwritten feedback as long as it is legible.” Students who can always or usually read their lecturers’ handwriting do not mind receiving this type of written feedback. Nevertheless, given a choice, the clear preference for most students is typed feedback.

Discussing their findings on legibility, Robinson et al. (2011, p.8) point out that while academics may feel that handwritten feedback is more personal, feedback cannot be useful if it is illegible. They also draw attention to students’ declining experience with deciphering handwriting due to an increased reliance on technology and conclude:

One simple method of improving student satisfaction with feedback is to increase the legibility of comments given. More time effective methods of providing typed feedback, such as voice recognition software or the use of a database of pre-written comments to generate personal reports for students, should be considered.

As students are obliged to submit their written assignments typed rather than hand-written, it seems inconsistent not to apply the same rules to written feedback provided by academics. While the switch from hand-written to typed feedback will eventually occur naturally, with increasing numbers of academics themselves more at ease and proficient with electronic forms of communication than with hand-writing, a more proactive approach to this aspect of feedback delivery is desirable. This may require active intervention by senior management in order to ensure timely progress.

**Student use of feedback**

Questions in this section explored students’ perspectives on their use of and engagement with the feedback provided. Question 9 asked students what they do with the written feedback they receive. According to students’ responses 93% always pick up marked assignments and another 6% pick up marked assignments most of the time. 81% stated that they always read the feedback, with another 18% reading it most of the time. These figures may be somewhat surprising to academics whose office shelves hold stacks of uncollected assignments, and is likely to reflect the self-selecting sample of respondents containing a higher than average ratio of more engaged and diligent students. 73% of students claimed that they always keep feedback they receive for future reference, with another 13% holding onto it most of the time. However, just 33% stated that they always refer back to feedback from a previous assignment when they start a new assignment, with another 26% taking this course of action most of the time.

Data from this question was triangulated with two Likert statements. While some lecturers believe that many students do not read the feedback given, 86% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement Most of the time I do not read the feedback given (S11). 60% of students even claimed to refer back to feedback on previous work when beginning a new
Two further Likert statements explored students’ use of feedback with regard to the stage of a module at which the feedback is given. About 55% of students agreed that they are more likely to read feedback given for the first assignment in a module (S6). Nevertheless, nearly 70% of respondents disagreed with Likert item S15: Feedback for the final assignment in a module is of no use to me as I have moved on to the next module. This poses a challenge to an approach that focuses feedback on assessments carried out in the earlier parts of a module and provides marks only for final assignments.

Three Likert items (S3, S8 and S16) explored opinions about student engagement frequently heard from academics and students alike, including participants at the pilot focus group, and previously in staff interviews (Bohnacker-Bruce, 2011). Over 55% of respondents agreed with the statement I am more interested in my grade than the feedback (S8), while a substantial minority of 25% disagreed. However, someone being more interested in their grade than the feedback does not necessarily indicate that feedback is of no interest to them at all. Data from this research shows very clearly that students assign high importance to feedback and this is also evident in other research:

The results…of this study suggest that extensive feedback is both read and valued by students regardless of the grade awarded. This contradicts previous literature that suggested that grades are ‘all-important’ (Stothart 2008; Wojtas 1998) and this suggests, in contrast to the views held by Butler (1987), that students are still keen to look beyond simply comparing grades with their peers (Robinson et al., 2011, p.8).

Statements S3 and S16 explored the link between student ability and use of feedback, suggesting The students who need the feedback the most are the least likely to read it (S3) and Able students are more likely to read the feedback (S16). The spread of responses for both these statements followed a similar standard distribution curve, with the majority of respondents, 35.6% and 39.1% respectively, choosing the ‘neither/nor’ middle option.

Question 10 asked students how effective they thought different approaches would be in encouraging them to engage with feedback. By far the most effective approach was seen to be a face-to-face meeting with a lecturer to discuss the assignment, followed by the option of having to collect grade and feedback from the lecturer rather than the faculty office, and being sent feedback by e-mail before receiving the grade. Verbal feedback given to the group during a seminar or lecture attracted a mixed response, while group feedback posted on the Learning Network was seen as the least effective approach (Table 2).

| 10. How effective do you think would the following approaches be in encouraging you to engage with feedback? Please select one option for each row. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very effective | Quite effective | Not very effective | Not effective at all |
| Lecturer invites me to discuss my work and the feedback face-to-face. | 75.2% | 20.7% | 4.1% | 0.0% |
| Grade and feedback have to be collected from the lecturer. | 34.7% | 40.5% | 21.5% | 3.3% |
| Lecturer sends me feedback by e-mail before I get my grade. | 21.5% | 47.1% | 21.5% | 9.9% |
| Group feedback is posted on the Learning Network. | 7.4% | 36.4% | 42.1% | 14.0% |
| Verbal feedback is given to the group during a seminar or lecture. | 14.9% | 40.5% | 33.9% | 10.7% |

**Quality of Feedback**

Although the questionnaire was overall more focused on exploring the procedural aspects of feedback delivery, some aspects of feedback quality were explored through additional Likert statements. Over 90% of students agreed that Feedback should
give specific direction for improvement (S12), and nearly 80% agreed that Feedback should be specific about the limitations or failings of a piece of work (S14). However, only around 65% of respondents agreed with the statement Lecturers make it clear what I need to do to improve my work (S5), while over 20% disagreed. Quality of feedback attracted many comments from students in various sections of the questionnaire, ranging from the entirely negative to the fairly positive, as the following two comments illustrate:

“I can’t think of one instance where feedback on an assignment has been useful. I have never been given any specific areas to improve on (and this isn’t because my work is always good, because it isn’t) which is the most useful constructive criticism a student needs for improvement.”

“My lecturers are usually very good at giving lots of feedback, generally this is supportive comments and ways/areas that need improvement. They also try to keep us informed as to what is going on with the marking.”

Students did not generally make explicit their definition of good quality feedback; the closest a student came was the following description: “It needs to prove they have read and understood your work.” On the other hand, students were very descriptive of feedback that did not meet their expectations, such as: “Feedback needs to be more detailed. Instead of saying improvements need to be made, be specific on what improvements these are.”, and “Feedback is of varying quality dependent on the lecturer. One memorable one being “Some parts good, other parts not.”.” Indeed, variations in the quality of feedback were a common complaint, attracting a number of student comments.

Variation in feedback was also reported as a problem by participants in a study by Robinson et al. (2011, p.8), for which the authors offer the following explanation:

However, it is also possible that a lack of understanding of the feedback discourse means that students are mistaking feedback which is presented differently as being different. It may be that although the feedback appears to be different when taken at face value the same advice is being given just in a different way.

**Other aspects of Feedback**

Several Likert items related to less quantifiable aspects of feedback, such as clarity of feedback, encouraging feedback and the linking of feedback to the marking scheme.

**Clarity of feedback**

Two very similar Likert statements (S19 and S22) explored the clarity of feedback, asking students whether they understood lecturers’ comments and the feedback. Although very similar, there was a noticeable difference in the responses. About 38% of respondents agreed that they often do not understand what lecturers’ comments mean, while only 28% agreed that they often do not understand what the feedback means. This difference may indicate that the majority of students are able to understand the feedback overall but sometimes do not understanding particular comments. An example of this can be found in the following student comment: “Also, although someone might write in feedback “you need to be more critical” this has never been discussed in a class: “how” to be critical”.

**Encouraging feedback**

In previous research on feedback with academics (Bohnacker-Bruce, 2011) there was strong evidence of lecturers routinely giving students some positive feedback, whatever the quality of the student’s work. This was reflected in the students’ responses: 65% of students agreed that lecturers manage to make a positive comment, even when the work submitted was not of a high standard (S7). However, from the discussions in the student pilot group it became clear that students found this confusing, and Likert statement S23 was added to the student questionnaire to further investigate this. 74% of students stated that they found it confusing to get positive feedback when being given a poor grade, and equally, critical comments alongside a good grade. One student noted:
“It is not useful feedback when they don’t give consistent marks across the board, i.e. when a lecturer gives you a good mark and some bad feedback and then your friend a really good mark and loads of bad feedback”.

**Link to marking scheme**
During previous research on feedback with academics, variations in practice regarding the link between feedback and the marking scheme became apparent (Bohnacker-Bruce, 2011). Some staff members habitually used the marking scheme in their feedback, usually because this had been standard practice in their previous places of work, whereas others did not make the link explicit. Four Likert statements (S9, S10, S18 and S21) were used to explore this further.

Over 70% of students agreed that feedback should be linked directly to the marking scheme (S9), while just 6% disagreed, showing a strong support from students for this approach. Current practice does not consistently follow this approach and 44% of students agreed with S18 Lecturers don’t seem to relate their feedback to assessment criteria. On the other hand, 50% of respondents agreed with S21 I can see how my feedback relates to the assessment criteria and 38% agreed that lecturers make it clear how the mark was arrived at (S10). These responses are likely to be a reflection of the differences in practice students encountered.

**Conclusions**
This paper presented student perspectives on practical, or procedural, aspects of feedback delivery, and on their use of and engagement with the feedback received. Price et al. (2010, p.287) point out that “measures such as timing, frequency, quantity or externally judged product quality can only indicate that some of the conditions for effective feedback are in place. They cannot prove that feedback is effective”. It is undoubtedly the case that the procedural aspects of feedback do not make feedback effective. However, it is also clear that the effectiveness of feedback can be affected detrimentally if these aspects are not dealt with adequately, if the “conditions for effective feedback” are not in place. It is therefore important to ensure that the procedural aspects of feedback are as conducive as possible to the effectiveness of feedback. For instance, legibility is a necessary pre-condition for effectiveness of feedback. It seems self-evident that in order for feedback to be effective, students need to be able to actually read it. However, this research indicates that for a substantial minority of students this is not the case consistently. To exclude any difficulties with legibility, all written feedback should be typed rather than hand-written. Feedback that students cannot read is a wasted effort and likely to frustrate students and increase their dissatisfaction.

With regard to timelines of feedback, this study, like several others, indicates that students only consider feedback timely if it is returned within two weeks. The likely reason for this is a short-term perspective on the central purpose of feedback, namely to inform the next assignment, rather than to contribute to students’ development in the longer term. This situation presents academics with a challenge, as a timeframe of two weeks is usually unmanageable for larger cohorts of undergraduates. While there is probably no single solution to this problem, active management of students’ expectations through clear explanations of the purpose and processes of feedback may make a longer timeframe more acceptable to students. At the same time, where smaller cohort sizes or the increased use of technology allow, feedback given within two weeks is likely to increase student satisfaction with feedback provision, while not, however, necessarily making the feedback more effective.

While individual verbal feedback was acknowledged to be most effective in encouraging student to engage with feedback, written feedback was the preferred format for a majority of students. Written feedback is considered the norm and accepted as effective and practicable for both staff and students. However, the availability of individual verbal feedback for those students who chose to make use of it increased students’ satisfaction with feedback provision, and where it was not available decreased their satisfaction. Bearing in mind increasing demands on academics’ time, realistic ways of facilitating the provision of individual
tutorials need to be found. One possible arrangement could be the offer of a ‘feedback clinic’, scheduled during a seminar following the return of an assignment, and running alongside the seminar, where students can sign up for a five- or ten-minute slot with the lecturer, taking a short absence from their seminar task. This and other effective arrangements already in use should be disseminated more widely and become part of normal practice.

Students in this study strongly challenged perceptions that they do not actually read the feedback provided, or that they are only interested in their grade. Instead they clearly expressed their appreciation of feedback that best serves what they consider to be the main purpose of feedback, namely to give practical advice on how to improve their performance in their next assignment. Satisfaction with feedback is likely to increase if it is provided in a way that meets these expectations. At the same time, students’ understanding of the more long-term aspects of feedback needs to be developed and expanded, to ensure they can take full advantage of it for their learning and performance.

Author Biography
In her role as Learning & Teaching Fellow Sabine conducts research on aspects of Learning and Teaching and manages the Winchester Research Apprenticeship Programme (WRAP) in the Faculty of Business, Law and Sport, engaging undergraduate students with academic research. She has a Masters degree in Philosophy and Religion and her current PhD research is on the formation of Church of England ministers’ beliefs about other religions. Sabine’s first degree is in Advertising and Marketing and she has previously worked in Publishing, Communications and Marketing for a range of organisations.

References


