

# **An Investigation into Programme Level Approaches to Feedback: Influences on Students' Learning and Feedback Literacy**

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This thesis is dedicated to all the graduate students who lost their lives, in part, or as a consequence of pursuing a PhD.

You deserved the opportunity to write your own thesis.

May you always be remembered as part of mine

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## ABSTRACT

In designing sustainable feedback practices, it is crucial to consider the kinds of learning that higher education is intended to cultivate. This research study investigates how a programme-focused approach to curriculum design affects a students' feedback literacy. This research stems from the growing focus on feedback literacy and what that implies for student engagement with feedback as a learning tool. While the current research focuses on feedback literacy at the student or individual module level, this study investigates what features of a programme can help, or hinder, a student's feedback literacy journey.

Based on a review of the literature on feedback and feedback literacy, a survey was distributed to students across five programmes at Edinburgh Napier University. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the programme leaders as well as module leaders, and follow-up focus groups were conducted with the students who participated in the survey. Analysis of the findings found that there were five programme characteristics that factored into a student's engagement with feedback literacy. They are:

- a. Staff attitudes to feedback
- b. Whether there is a programme-focused approach
- c. Students' role in feedback
- d. Whether there is a sustained approach to feedback
- e. Institutional acceptance of the challenges of developing a sustained approach to feedback

On this basis, it is recommended that not only do programmes consider a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback, but that in order to help further the development of the students' feedback literacy, staff must first be feedback literate themselves. Further research is needed to identify whether a shift in programme structure has an overall impact on student engagement with feedback and leads to the development of a stronger feedback literacy.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will introduce the research study. It will start with a brief overview of the research in the field of assessment and feedback. This will help provide the context and the background for the importance of this study. Following the background and importance of the study, a detailed explanation of the importance of the study, the research questions and operational definitions that will help aid in the understanding of terms around assessment and feedback and how they will be used in this study. This chapter will end with the structure for the remainder of the thesis.

## 1.2 ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Research on assessment and feedback practices in higher education has been embraced on a local, national, and even global level. There is a substantial body of research that focuses on everything from enhancing assessment and feedback practices, student engagement, constructive alignment, and feedback as a learning tool (Evans & Waring, 2011). Part of the growing body of research is the focus on how assessment and feedback relate to student satisfaction. Evidence from the National Student Survey in the United Kingdom and Student Experience survey in Australia illustrate that students in higher education are still largely dissatisfied with the assessment procedures and the feedback process that comes from them (Carless & Boud, 2018). Many students enter higher education with the notion of feedback as telling (McLean et al., 2015) or simply corrective comments (O'Donovan, 2017). Universities and higher education institutions are now placing a greater importance on not only boosting student

satisfaction, but on structuring assessments and feedback practices that will help students gain a better understanding of how and why those processes aid student learning (Sambell 2016; Carless & Boud, 2018). With the plethora of research available, surprisingly little in comparison has focused on the concept of feedback literacy and how that feedback literacy is important for undergraduate students' use of feedback as a learning tool (Carless & Boud, 2018). For the purpose of this study, feedback literacy is defined as:

the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies (Carless & Boud, 2018)

In addition to the importance of feedback literacy, research around a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback is starting to gain momentum (Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014). It is common practice for institutions to construct a programme based on collecting individual modules (Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014) which can weaken the cohesion of a programme and make it difficult for students to make the connections between the modules they are taking. It can therefore be seen that academic research in this field has now moved to thinking about assessment and feedback as a core component of curriculum design.

What is missing from the current literature on feedback literacy is what role the programme structure and the attitudes of staff toward feedback play in a student's development of their feedback literacy. The current research primarily focuses on feedback literacy at the student or module level, or how a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback can help students engage with feedback as a learning tool (Jessop et al, 2014; Carless & Boud, 2018). This

study fills that gap by exploring what happens when a programme is created with the goal of developing a students' feedback literacy at the forefront.

### 1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This research study investigates how a programme-focused approach to curriculum design affected a students' feedback literacy. This research stems from the growing focus on feedback literacy and what that implies for student engagement with feedback as a learning tool (Carless & Boud, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019; Han & Xu, 2019). Current research discusses feedback literacy as something that is learned at the module level, and something that the students must learn while they move through their programme of study. What is missing from the literature is an investigation on how the programme structure can aid, or hinder, a student in becoming feedback literate.

This research also stemmed from Edinburgh Napier University's interest in funding research in educational pedagogy. The university was interested in an understanding of the ways in which students learn from their assessments and the feedback they receive and what that process means in terms of overall student satisfaction. This study was running in tandem with the university trialling the implementation of Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) as part of the programme focused approach. The university ran a pilot study utilising TESTA in 2014 in one school and opened up the rest of the schools as potential participants of TESTA in 2015. The programmes identified for participation in the university study were then ineligible to participate in this study.

### 1.3.1 THE NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY AND INFLUENCES ON ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK DESIGN

Once a year, publicly funded universities in the United Kingdom take part in the National Student Survey. The survey is aimed at final year students and provides them an opportunity to provide feedback about their university experience. Edinburgh Napier is committed to using the results of the NSS to implement some changes to university policy. As Husbands and Pearce (2012, p. 4) write:

There is robust evidence that giving serious consideration to pupil voice can generate highly effective pedagogy. Listening to pupil voice involves more than hearing what pupils have to say as part of the process of learning and teaching, and increasing attention has been given in recent years to the issues involved in, and the potential benefits that flow from, consulting pupils about this process

The university is interested in the practices and perceptions of assessment and feedback across the different disciplines. They are particularly interested in how well programmes are promoting assessment for learning, and whether feedback could aid in the process. According to the Assessment and Feedback Design Guidelines for Edinburgh Napier University (2017, p. 3):

Assessment for learning at Edinburgh Napier University is underpinned by five principles: promotion of learning, transparency, equity, validity and reliability. While these principles remain important, they are also very general. The university has the added challenge of negotiating the dialectic between guidelines and rules for assessment (to meet QAA requirements and for consistency) and ensuring that academic decisions are appropriate for disciplinary contexts.

### 1.3.2 PROGRAMME FOCUSED APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Following the growing trend across the sector, a key new concern for the university is to achieve 'programme focus' in its teaching, ensuring that students experience a coherent and planned set of modules that build towards programme level outcomes. To this end the university supported the application of Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA)

approach to programme audit across the schools. TESTA is a process that works with, and for programmes, to 'identify study behaviour, generate assessment patterns to foster deeper learning across whole programmes, and debunk regulatory myths which prevent assessment for learning' (testa.ac.uk). The findings of this research can be used by institutions to help consider what programme structure is most useful for the development of a student's feedback literacy and the potential benefits to formative assessment. Because the TESTA process involved the independent collection of rich data from staff and students concerning feedback and assessment, it provided an excellent opportunity to explore the assessment and feedback practices on a more personal and rigorous level than the NSS. TESTA allowed for discussions with the programme leads, with module leaders and lecturers, and students to get a more complete representation of the assessment and feedback practices in the programmes. The current research will assist programmes in considering what programme structure can help students develop their feedback literacy skills and engage with the feedback they receive throughout the entirety of their degree programme.

#### 1.4 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

This research will explore the extent to which universities can make improvements as an institution through academic enquiry to support some of the more difficult decisions that the university often must make. It is vital that even the institutional aspects of the university be built on scholarship to help inhabit the university's purpose of providing a rich and fulfilling environment for students (BIS, 2016). This aspect of the research project is important and implies a mutual relationship between the researcher and the party interested in the results of the research. While the relationship is not balanced, there is still one-party learning from another.

What can be gained from the relationship works for the benefit of the group. Pedagogical research will also help make the 'why' aspect of educational policy visible. Policies might be better received if staff and students that the policies affected, better understood what went into the creation of the policy. It would be beneficial for staff and students see the research and the decision making process that leads to policy changes (Evans, 2011; Raaper, 2017).

While the NSS generates data on how students feel about the feedback they receive, it merely gives a snapshot of a how a participant feels at a particular moment in time. Students in their final year of study are the only ones allowed to participate in the survey, but the results are not released and acted upon until after the participants have graduated. The sample is not representative of the entire programme. There is also the risk that survey question/answer choices can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, and therefore elicit a multitude of responses. Within the confines of the survey it is impossible to know how a respondent defines the way in which they answer the question. Therefore, simply using the NSS to explore the assessment and feedback practices of a programme were not rigorous enough to examine the students' and staffs' understanding of feedback literacy.

#### 1.4.1 FEEDBACK LITERACY

Knowing what feedback is, and knowing what to do with it though, are not necessarily synonymous. While it is important that students understand what feedback is in the general sense, it is more important that they understand what type of feedback they are getting, and how to use that feedback as a learning tool and it is used as they progress through their

programme of study (Carless & Boud, 2018). This feedback literacy moves beyond just being able to read feedback, but also how to integrate feedback into the learning process. For the purpose of this research, feedback literacy will be defined according to Carless and Boud (2018, p.1316) as:

the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies.

The authors further explain the definition stating that:

Students' feedback literacy involves an understanding of what feedback is and how it can be managed effectively; capacities and dispositions to make productive use of feedback; and appreciation of the roles of teachers and themselves in these processes. (p. 1316)

Therefore, students need time early in their programme to learn about different types of feedback that they will receive and what to do with that feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Nicol, 2010).

This study argues for a shift in the conception of feedback literacy as something that happens at the modular or individual student level to a skill set that needs to be built into the curriculum design at the programme level. This study examines the characteristics of a programme that can help or hinder students' development of their feedback literacy. It shifts from the current thinking of feedback literacy to a holistic process that needs to be supported and nurtured. There is a lack of research in the field that examines what can be done to promote feedback literacy from the programme level, and how staffs' attitude to feedback can encourage or hinder a students' development of their feedback skills. The current literature tends to focus on feedback literacy

as something that is developed at the individual student level and happens at the module level while other teaching and learning happens.

## 1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This chapter has previously explained the importance of research on assessment and feedback, and why a focus on feedback literacy is important. I also detailed how the current research on feedback literacy is focused on what can be done at the individual student level, or the module level. This study will move away from analysing feedback literacy at that level and examined how programme structure can help or hinder a students' feedback literacy. It is from that shift in perspective around feedback literacy that the research questions were created.

The research questions are:

- How can programme design influence the development of feedback literacy over time?
- How do assessment and feedback practices impact on the development of feedback literacy over time?

## 1.6 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS AND KEY TERMS

With the wide variety of definitions in the literature regarding assessment and feedback, it can be difficult to make streamlined decisions. For the purpose of this research, it was important to establish some very clear definitions for the terms that would be used frequently throughout the chapters.



### 1.6.1 FEEDBACK

Feedback is at the heart of this study, and because of that, the way in which I use the term is very important. Whilst many authors agree that feedback is a fundamental component of assessment (Hattie, & Timperley, 2007; Hester, 2001; Rowntree, 1987) there are multiple definitions and interpretations of the term. For example, Kulhavy (1977) defined feedback as any of the multitude of techniques that are used to communicate to a learner if a response is right or wrong. More recently, feedback has been defined as ‘information about how the student’s present state (of learning and performance) relates to goals and standards’ (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). A common characteristic of the multitude of definitions is that feedback provides some illumination for the student on his or her performance for a given task. For the purpose of this thesis, feedback is defined as:

***A process whereby learners obtain information about their work ... in order to generate improved work*** (Boud & Molloy 2013, p. 6).

This definition is chosen because it focuses on the key role feedback should have in the learning process. It defines the process of feedback as something that is not merely a justification of a mark, or that comes at the end of learning a task or skill, but rather as something to be used to improve future performance or understanding. This captures the dynamic, corrective feature of feedback found in the cybernetic roots of the term. For example, in the definition given by Ramaprasad (1983) of feedback is ‘information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter *which is used to alter the gap in some way*’ (italics added). Hence, feedback implies future change. In many circles (Reimann, Sadler, & Sambell, 2019; Scott, 2014; Hine & Northeast, 2016; Hill & West, 2020) this forward-focused information is referred to as ‘feedforward’; here, I use the word ‘feedback’ as these early definitions imply, to include such

ideas of responsive change.

### 1.6.2 FEEDBACK LITERACY

One of the potential reasons that students choose not to engage with their feedback is their moderate to low feedback literacy (Carless, 2019). Building on the model of academic literacy, Sutton (2012) conceptualised feedback literacy as

‘the ability to read, interpret, and use written feedback’, which involves an epistemological dimension (knowledge building), an ontological dimension (identity construction), and a practical dimension (cognition and actions occurring in the use of feedback). (p. 31)

Sutton’s early defining of the term feedback literacy included the students unpacking and understanding the expectations of their lecturer in relation to their own academic identity as a student. This is further challenged if the feedback challenges the student to examine their own way of knowing and interacting with their learning. Carless and Boud (2018) built on Sutton’s (2012) definition.

They define feedback literacy as:

the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies. Students’ feedback literacy involves an understanding of what feedback is and how it can be managed effectively; capacities and dispositions to make productive use of feedback; and appreciation of the roles of teachers and themselves in these processes. (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1316)

This is the definition of feedback literacy that will be utilised in this study. A critical analysis of the definition and what feedback literacy is will take place in Chapter Three.

### 1.6.3 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

At the start of my thesis, Edinburgh Napier created a definition of Formative Assessment that would be used university wide. This definition was created to clear up confusion around the practice of formative assessment, and how the staff use it at different points of a programme of study. Edinburgh Napier University completed a university wide project to help redefine Formative Assessment on campus, and that definition will help serve as a foundational definition for this study. The definition was created by researching how formative assessment is being defined in the literature as well as how Edinburgh Napier wanted to portray the concept across campus. That definition of Formative Assessment is:

*explicit and planned activities that feature throughout a programme, usually within a module, and are designed for all students studying it. Formative Assessment is not credit-bearing. Its purpose is to provide high quality feedback to students on their current knowledge and skills so that these can be developed and demonstrated in subsequent summative assessments.*

Endorsed by Edinburgh Napier University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, May 18th 2016

This definition was used as a base and compared to the responses that staff and students provide throughout the course of the research.

### 1.7 ORGANIZATION OF THIS THESIS

- This thesis will start with an outline of the methodological procedures that I used to help collect the data as well as a discussion of the research design, including the research strategy and my philosophical and theoretical perspective. I will then discuss the participating programmes and the way the data was generated. I will move on to a discussion about the TESTA methodology and three components that make up the data

collection process. I will outline my procedure for data analysis and offer some critical reflexivity on my part to help explain some of the choices that I made throughout the data collection process. I chose to put the Methodology chapter at the start of the thesis because I believe that it is important to introduce the 'how' of the research before the 'why'. It was important for me that the reader understands the study before they review the literature or engage with the findings and discussion as the review of the literature and the identification of the gap in the literature is also a fundamental component of the research process.

- Chapter Three will focus on a review of the literature on assessment and feedback, with an emphasis on feedback literacy. The latest literature focused on the development of student feedback literacy and programme-wide approaches to feedback in higher education will be consulted and discussed, as well as the gap in the literature around programme structure and feedback literacy.
- Chapter Four will focus on a presentation and analysis of the findings. Each programme will be presented as a separate case study to highlight the themes that emerged during the course of data collection.
- Chapter Five will present an argument for how the outcomes of the data analysis make an original contribution to knowledge. This will show what the outcomes add to the existing literature.

- This study will conclude with a summary of the research and how the themes discovered can be applied to other universities that are interested in a programme focused approach to feedback and what that means in terms of helping students develop their feedback literacy over time. The chapter will conclude with some recommendations for universities as well as suggestions for further advancing the study.

## 1.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the study. It started with a background to the field of assessment and feedback as well as the importance of the current study and how it is addressing a gap in current research. It moved on to a presentation of the research questions which will remain a central focus when discussing the research. The chapter concluded with a definition of terms that will be used throughout the study and a presentation of the structure of the thesis. The next chapter will focus on the methods and methodology that enabled data collection.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This exploratory research, which is inductive in nature, demonstrates the importance of understanding what features of a university programme can help, or hinder, a students' development of feedback literacy. My overarching research questions reframe the conversation of how to encourage students' feedback literacy by widening the scope of what it means to teach students to be feedback literate. The research questions are:

- How can programme design influence the development of feedback literacy over time?
- How do assessment and feedback practices impact on the development of feedback literacy over time?

While a doctoral thesis commonly places the methodology chapter after the literature review, alternative approaches are equally as valid. Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2010) argue that the standard practice is simply a guideline, and that 'every individual case is likely to differ' (p 262). As this is an exploratory study, I consider the search for and analysis of previous research in the field to be an integral part of my own research. I contend that my study begins with the secondary research, and it is therefore part of my research design. For this reason, I have elected to present the methodology first. This chapter begins with an explanation of the research design, the methods of data collection, and the analysis of the collected data and how it supports an

original contribution to knowledge in the field of feedback literacy. I will aim to establish my trustworthiness by writing as clearly and honestly as possible, and by being reflexive and critical about the decisions that I made during the process of the study design and then the collection and analysis of the data. I will discuss my reasoning for mapping the assessment and feedback practices of each of the programmes. The discussion will then move on to utilising interviews and focus groups with programme leads, module leaders and lecturers. The discussion will end with the survey, focus groups and interviews that allowed students to provide an insight and overview of how they engaged with the assessment and feedback practices of their programme. I will also detail the procedures used to collect the data, as well as the coding phrases and methods of statistical analysis used to explore the responses to the student survey.

## 2.2 PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

It is important to understand how my approach to research, and the way in which I view the world around me influenced the way in which the data were collected and interpreted throughout the study. I believe that we all interact with the world in which we are a part of, but that interaction is different for all people. The way that we process knowledge, and the ways that we understand the spaces that we inhabit, are influenced by the way we grew up, where we grew up, and how we grew up. We as social beings make sense of the world based on the people that we come in contact with, and together with those people we create artefacts and the meanings behind them using the language and tools that we have available to us within our culture.

I believe that there is an underlying objective reality to the physical world, but that the social world is different. I do not think it is possible to make blanket statements that social truth is a

universal concept for everyone. I believe that the best way to figure out what everyone's "truths" are is to talk to them, interact with them, and not try to make their truths the same as my truths. These beliefs sit within a social constructivist paradigm and are also reflected in elements of Critical Theory. The following section will outline not only what Critical Theory and Social Constructivism are, but how they influenced the choices that I made concerning data collection and data analysis.

### 2.2.1 CRITICAL THEORY

Critical Theory as an epistemology, works to examine dialectical reason. For Marxists, dialectical reasoning is the process of change through the conflict of opposing ideas or forces. It involves oscillating between the two opposing ideas until the emergence of a new situation. Philosophers and scholars were no longer just 'scholastic' about the way in which the world worked, but now sought to be transformative. As Marx (1845) states, The philosophers have [hitherto] only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it.' This is the Critical Theory that is credited to the Frankfurt School. The theory served as a response to the rise of the Nazis, and the fear that people were willing to be spoon fed mass culture, even if it was harmful. It is from this belief then that Critical Theory has an imperative to articulation. This means that everyone has to be given a voice and given the power to shape their lives. Without that, there is a danger that reality will be imposed on a person and can be created by someone in power. 'Given the emphasis among the first generation of Critical Theory on human beings as the self-creating producers of their own history, a unique practical aim of social inquiry suggests itself: to transform contemporary capitalism into a consensual form of social life' (Stanford University. & Center for the Study of Language and Information (U.S.), 1997).



Critical Theory served as the framework for the design of the study. TESTA is focused on the experience of students, and because of that, only students are surveyed and interviewed. This means that the voice of staff who assess the students and provide feedback is absent. This led me to including an interview with the programme leaders and the module leaders. Their voices are absent from the data that is constructed through the use of TESTA. While the student voice is essential when designing a study to help students gain a greater feedback literacy, their voice only provides half of the picture of what is happening in a programme. With Critical Theory having an imperative to articulation, this means that all the people involved in the assessment and feedback process need to be included.

### 2.2.2 CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism as a paradigm or worldview posits that learning is an active, constructive process. The learner is an information constructor. People actively construct or create their own subjective representations of objective reality. New information is linked to prior knowledge, thus mental representations are subjective (“Constructivism - Learning Theories,” 2016).

Doolittle (1999) identifies four components of Constructivism. These components help form the basis of my epistemological beliefs. The four components are:

1. Knowledge is not passively accumulated, but rather, is the result of active cognizing by the individual;
2. Cognition is an adaptive process that functions to make an individual's behaviour more viable given a particular environment;
3. Cognition organizes and makes sense of one's experience, and is not a process to render an accurate representation of reality; and

4. Knowing has roots in both biological/neurological construction, and social, cultural, and language-based interactions (Dewey, 1916/1980; Garrison, 1997, 1998; Gergen, 1995).

It is a paradigm that exists on a spectrum, with varying types of constructivism. That spectrum includes:

- Cognitive Constructivism: where the construction of learning goes on inside the mind of the learner,
- Social Constructivism: to which human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others (McKinley, 2015), and
- Radical Constructivism: the assumption that knowledge, no matter how it is defined, is not a transferable substance, and that the thinking subject has no alternative but to construct what he or she knows on the basis of his or her own experience.] (Doolittle et al., 1999).

On the spectrum, I am a Social Constructivist. As Bakhtin (1984) states, "truth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p. 110). This means that truth is created through conversation and interaction and it is not something that can happen if there is social isolation. While I am constantly trying to make sense of the world, I do so through the context and in terms of how those around me come to their understanding of 'truth.' I believe that it is dependent on convention, human perception and social experience. Thus, learning is always an active process, and is dependent on the interaction between people. This is not to say that I ignore objective reality though. '...people cannot socially construct reality, but they can construct

understanding of what they experience and define together' (Cottone, 2017). This means that I learn what to consider real, valuable, important and necessary in relation to the objective reality. I construct an internal reality, and I interact with an external reality. This is why dialogue with others, and active learning are essential to the way in which I construct my reality.

As von Glasersfeld (1989) states: 'Knowledge is never acquired passively, because novelty cannot be handled except through assimilation to a cognitive structure the experiencing subject already has. Indeed, the subject does not perceive an experience as novel until it generates a perturbation relative to some expected result' (p. 189). In other words, people will never learn anything new unless their current thoughts and knowledge are challenged by others. Within that though, I am also interested in the importance of practical consequences, and how the theory, and the ideas that we generate from our research, really affect people who are interested in promoting feedback literacy in students. I am also concerned with what those consequences mean for moving forward with new research. It is intention that practical and useful knowledge can come from social inquiry.

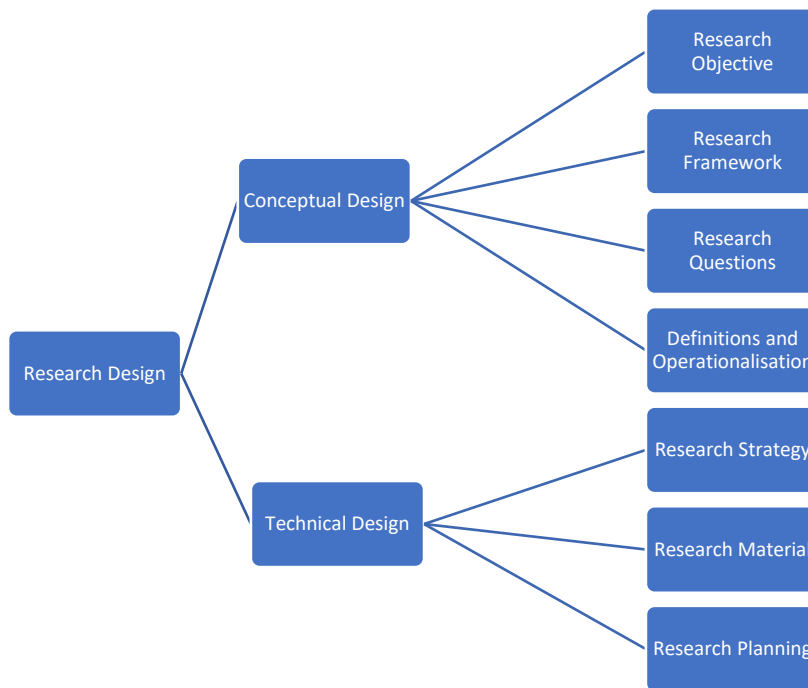
For me, social constructivism provided a foundation to help me understand the best way to help both students and stakeholder roles in feedback literacy. With my belief that knowledge is created through social interaction, it was important for me to be able to have a chance to speak with the stakeholders. All the conversations, questions, and interactions with staff and students offered a chance to construct meaning about assessment and feedback and offered the chance to involve the people involved in the focus groups and interviews in the process of constructing

recommendations. The research methods chosen for this study were designed to maximise the opportunities for meaning construction in relation to feedback literacy.

### 2.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design is an integral part of the research study process. The lack of a strong research design can be detrimental to the quality of the project. Strong research design has two important parts, the conceptual design of the research as well as the technical research design. They are illustrated in figure 2.1 Components of research design. This figure was created by Verschuren and Doorewaard (2010).

**Figure 2.1: Components of research design**



### 2.3.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research objective of a study is a statement that sets out to describe what the project hopes to achieve. The research objective for this study is to identify the components of a degree programme that can help or hinder a students' feedback literacy over time.

The research framework was put in place at the start of the study. The framework helped build a timeline not only for the data collection, but for the formal write-up of the study. This included the creation of the research objective and the research questions that built toward achieving the objective. The framework was also put into place to make sure that the research objectives remained the focus of the investigation. The research framework also included the theoretical framework and my philosophical approach to data collection which was outlined at the start of this chapter.

### 2.4 RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research strategy is the step by step process that provides a structure to the research study and allows the research to be completed in a systematic and rigorous manner. This allows for the production of quality results and detailed reporting. The following section will outline the process that allowed for data generation.

The first step in data generation was the analysis of secondary data. This started with a collection of articles and studies that have been conducted on both feedback literacy and programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback. The collection and analysis of the secondary data allowed for an understanding of the current field but led to the identification of a gap in the

literature. The identification of the gap then allowed for the creation of research questions that would address the gap. The literature that served as the secondary data will be explored in depth in Chapter Three.

#### 2.4.1 PARTICIPATING PROGRAMMES

The selection of programmes for this study was based on opportunistic sampling (Jupp & Sage Publications., 2006). I wanted to make sure that I had programmes from the different schools on campus, excluding the School of Health and Social Care because they served as the school for the pilot study and had already participated in the TESTA process. The programmes in the first round of data collection were secured by my supervisor prior to the start of my study. There were different motivations among programme leaders for participation in the study. Programme A was interested in restructuring the current programme, while Programme B wanted to assess the gaps and shortcomings in the programme, as well as potential programme enhancements.

The second round of data collection was again put in place with the help of my supervisor. He introduced me to a programme that was really interested in a programme audit. Programme D had moved to a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback and wanted insight into how that change was working with students' learning and engagement with feedback. Programme C was a member of the original university TESTA project, but asked to be released from that commitment to work with me because they felt that they needed a more in-depth examination into the student experience on the programme than what could be done in the accelerated timeframe for the university project. The final programme, Programme E was added to the data collection process because they are a hard science programme and would provide

valuable insight from a fifth discipline at Edinburgh Napier University. A description of the programme structure and important disciplinary details will be provided in Chapter Four.

#### 2.4.2 DATA GENERATION

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were used simultaneously 'in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem' (Creswell, 2007, p.14). A mixed methods approach was selected because the integration of both qualitative and quantitative research provided a strong foundation for dependableness and comparativeness. This allows for both breadth and depth of data to be collected. A purely quantitative study might not provide the 'why' behind the numbers, and qualitative research cannot always gather the large number of participants that a quantitative study can generate. The integration of methods provides the academic rigour needed to really produce a meaningful study. In addition to creating a mixed methods study, there were several points in the data generation process that were checked by my supervisors. They did their own coding with a small section of anonymised transcripts to help make sure that my coding was an accurate understanding of the data. We also worked together to go over the codes once I had created them to make sure that they represented not only what was generated from the data, but also aligned with the research objectives and allowed me to really look at the research questions (Given, 2008; O'Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2010).

Primary data were generated in four ways. The first part of the data was generated through a programme audit. The audit allowed the researcher and programme leader to map the assessment practices of each module. Attention is given to the number of summative and

formative assessments, the weight of each assignment towards the final mark for the module, and the type as well as the amount of feedback that the students get from lecturers and tutors.

It is a qualitative tool using people and papers to build an evidence-informed picture of programme assessment. It is sometimes difficult for the programme leader to know exactly how assessment runs on particular modules. There is often a gap between documents and the reality of student experience (TESTA.ac.uk)

The audit allows for the assessment and feedback patterns to be collected and provides a view of what a 'typical' student might expect throughout the entirety of the programme.

The second method utilised was the Assessment Experience Questionnaire. This twenty-eight-question survey was developed by Gibbs and Simpson (2004) for TESTA. It used a Likert Scale to determine how students felt about the assessment and feedback procedures, and their overall satisfaction with the course. The survey questions are broken into four sections: the experience with the assessment on the course, learning from the course, learning from exams, and overall satisfaction with the course. The questionnaire is anonymous, with students only being asked their programme of study, age, gender, and average achievement on the course. It takes about ten minutes to complete and should be given to students who are in different years of their study. There are nine scales on the AEQ. The scales as well as the alpha scores were created by Gibbs and Simpson (2004). It is unclear as to why some of the scales lack an alpha score. The scales are:

**Quantity of effort (alpha=0.69)**

6 The way the assessment worked you had to put the hours in regularly every week  
13 On this course it was necessary to work consistently hard to meet the assessment requirements

**Coverage of syllabus (alpha=0.85)**

4 You had to study the entire syllabus to do well in the assessment



- 5 The assessment system made it possible to be quite selective about what parts of courses you studied (Negative scoring)
- 11 It was possible to be quite strategic about which topics you could afford not to study (Negative scoring)
- 17 The way the assessment worked on this course you had to study every topic

### **Quantity and quality of feedback (alpha=0.61)**

- 3 I received hardly any feedback on my work (Negative scoring)
- 15 I didn't understand some of the feedback on my work (Negative scoring)
- 16 Whatever feedback I received on my work came too late to be useful (Negative scoring)

### **Use of feedback (alpha=0.70)**

- 1 I used the feedback I received to go back over what I had done in my work
- 2 The feedback I received prompted me to go back over material covered in the course
- 8 I paid careful attention to feedback on my work and tried to understand what it was saying

### **Appropriate assessment**

- 10 The staff seemed more interested in testing what I had memorised than what I understood (Negative scoring)
- 14 Too often the staff asked me questions just about facts (Negative scoring)
- 18 To do well on this course all you really needed was a good memory (Negative scoring)

### **Clear goals and standards**

- 7 It was always easy to know the standard of work expected
- 9 The teachers made it clear from the start what they expected from students
- 12 It was often hard to discover what was expected of me in this course (Negative scoring)

### **Surface Approach**

- 21 When I'm reading I try to memorise important facts which may come in useful later
- 25 I find I have to concentrate on memorising a good deal of what we have to learn
- 26 Often I found I had to study things without having a chance to really understand them

### **Deep Approach**

- 22 I usually set out to understand thoroughly the meaning of what I am asked to read.
- 23 I generally put a lot of effort into trying to understand things which initially seem difficult
- 24 I often found myself questioning things that I heard in classes or read in books

### **Feedback as a Learning Tool**

25 I have used feedback provided on my work in one module to help with work in another.  
26 As I have progressed through my course, I have become better at using feedback to improve my performance.

### **Learning from the examination (alpha=0.78)**

27 Doing the exams brings things together for me  
28 I learn new things while preparing for the exams  
29 I understand things better as a result of the exams

### **Satisfaction**

30 Overall I am satisfied with the teaching on this course

The survey was distributed online through NOVI Survey with the help of the programme leaders. Novi Survey software is Edinburgh Napier's only approved software for distributing an online survey to students. It is secure, completely confidential, and meets ethical approval from the university. An explanation of the research project, how to get in contact with me, and a link to the survey was emailed to all the students registered on the programme through the programme leaders' email address. A paper copy was distributed in modules by the researcher when it could be arranged. For the purposes of my research, a tenth scale was created. 'Feedback as a learning tool,' had two questions to assess whether students used the feedback they received to help with subsequent tasks. This scale was added to the existing TESTA survey in order to better capture data related to encouraging feedback literacy, and to ascertain whether students are using the feedback they receive to improve their skills for a future assignment.

### **2.4.3 FOCUS GROUPS**

Following the Assessment Experience Questionnaire, focus groups were scheduled with students to gain a richer understanding of the students' experience in their programme. The students were

recruited during the survey process. I asked students to write their emails on the survey if they were willing to speak with me later and interviewed some of the students immediately after they completed the survey. The programme leader for one programme sent out an email to students that he felt would be willing to speak with me and I scheduled focus groups or interviews with them as they responded. The discussion topics ranged from the varying types of assessment, how the assessment influences the amount of effort the student puts into studying, what the feedback is like and if it is useful, and if students use the feedback they receive. The focus groups lasted about sixty minutes. The TESTA manual recommends that there be about six students in each focus group conducted. In line with my social constructivist worldview, the focus groups were semi structured, with the questions serving more as prompts for discussion and conversation starters. The TESTA focus group questions focus on the assessments that students complete as well as the feedback they receive, and since this study is focused on feedback, I omitted those questions in the interest of time and relevance. The questions focused on the students' concrete experiences as well as their thoughts on what they felt would make good feedback (See Appendix A for the survey and Appendix B for the focus group questions).

#### 2.2.5 INTERVIEWS WITH MODULE LEADERS AND LECTURERS

In addition to the focus groups with the students, interviews were conducted with module leaders and lecturers to further add to the complete view of the programme experience. These interviews were added in addition to the way data is generated using TESTA. I felt that I would have a better understanding of the programmes if everyone involved in the programme was included. It is also part of the study to understand how staff felt about the feedback provided during the course of a programme, and what questions they have about students' understanding

of the feedback they are provided during the modules (See Appendix C for a list of the questions). This also allows for the data to be triangulated and allows for the views of all the stakeholders to contribute to my understanding of what aspects of a programme promote students' feedback literacy over time. The semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. It was important for me to use semi-structured interviews because this method can be used for both group interviews and individual interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and the structure is flexible enough to support the purpose of the interview as well as the research questions (Kelly, 2010).

As Kallio et al. (2016) write:

One of the main advantages is that the semi-structured interview method has been found to be successful in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta 2012), enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant's responses (Hardon et al. 2004, Rubin & Rubin 2005, Polit & Beck 2010) and allowing space for participants' individual verbal expressions (RWJF [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation] 2008).

The questions ranged from how the module leaders designed the assessment for the course, how they provide feedback to students, what their definition of formative assessment is, and whether or not they think students can make connections between the modules. The interview lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes (See Appendix D for questions).

## 2.5 QUALITY CRITERIA

For the purposes of this study, it was essential to examine the generalisability and validity of the research beyond what the creators of TESTA had already benchmarked. It involves the

considerations of all aspects of creating the methodology, the analysis of the data, and the ways in which the results are presented. The first step in this process is transparency.

The notion of transparency is an overarching concern for establishing the quality of qualitative research. At its most basic, transparency is the benchmark for writing up research and the presentation and dissemination of findings; that is, the need to be explicit, clear, and open about the methods and procedures used. As such, transparency is recognized as a basic requirement of all qualitative research. (Given, 2008)

Establishing the quality criteria meant establishing trustworthiness, being completely forthright in my choices, and making sure that I provide rich descriptions of the process. This, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is a way of achieving a type of external validity. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. This can also be strengthened by the use of Ritchie and Spenser's (1994 as cited in Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003) development of a framework, which is a tool to help with data management. There are four central principles in the framework that can be applied to various methods of qualitative research. They are:

1. **contributory** in advancing wider knowledge or understanding about policy, practice, theory or a particular substantive field;
2. **defensible in design** by providing a research strategy that can address the evaluative questions posed;
3. **rigorous** in conduct through the systematic and transparent collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data;
4. **credible** in claim through offering well-founded and plausible arguments about the significance of the evidence generated. (Spencer et al., 2003)

I used Ritchie's model for the development of a framework like a checklist to make sure that I was offering a study that was as transparent as possible. There were many discussions with my supervisory team about what this research would contribute to the field of assessment and feedback, and how this research was going to be different from the hundreds of other studies that have been completed in the field. This study focused on the programme characteristics that can help or hinder students' feedback literacy rather than just focusing on what students can do to encourage their feedback literacy, or rules for staff to follow to provide 'good feedback'.

I came back to these four principles when I started to code and analyse the transcripts of the interviews with the programme leaders, lecturers and module leaders, and the focus groups and interviews with the students. The principles allowed me to make sure that I was giving all of the stakeholders a voice in the research, and to make sure that I could properly reflect on the process and discuss my findings with my supervisory team as the data was being constructed. These four principles allowed my original contribution to knowledge to move to the forefront of the study. The programme characteristics and the staff attitudes toward feedback literacy could become the focus of the study, rather than reading the transcripts with an expectation of what I thought I would learn from the interviews and focus groups.

In addition to transparency, I wanted to make sure that I established myself as trustworthy. I followed the four factors of trustworthiness from (Guba, 1981) when working to establish my trustworthiness. They are:

1. **Credibility:** This involves the confidence of the researcher in the study findings. To establish credibility in this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to illustrate that even with the data presented in multiple ways, the results converged to reach the same conclusion
2. **Transferability:** This involves how well the findings can be related to other situations. The best way to help establish this is through thick description.
3. **Confirmability:** This involves making sure that the findings presented in the study come from the data and are not influenced by the beliefs of the researcher. For this study, it meant acknowledging my own position within the research study, and presenting the findings using as many direct quotes from the interviews as possible to show the words of the participants. To make sure that I was not merely selecting quotes that supported the points that I hoped to make, I had several conversations with my supervisor around the transcripts and went back through the transcripts to see if the uncoded data offered counterarguments to the data I was utilising.
4. **Dependability:** This involves another researcher being able to replicate the study and generate consistent findings. This means that there is enough information presented in this chapter, as well as the rest of the study, for someone to be able to do this study and generate the same type of data.

To establish trustworthiness in my research I had to acknowledge that as a social constructivist, and someone who believes that there are many forms of truth and reality that I need to:

be concerned with articulating whose reality is captured in the research and to whom the research is believable and appropriate. These researchers may adopt the language of credibility with an understanding that credibility must be assessed from some perspective rather than as an inherent quality of the research. John Creswell and Dana Miller, for example, consider credibility from the perspectives of researchers, research participants, and research consumers (i.e., readers and reviewers of the research). (Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research: L - Z; Index 2010)

This means that I acknowledge my role in the research, the intended audience of the study, and the perspectives of the participants. It is what led to the creation of interview questions with staff, and the acknowledgment at the start of this chapter of my belief in Critical Theory and Social Constructivism. By allowing for all voices to be present in the study, for many perspectives to be considered and robust discussion to take place.

For further credibility of my study, it was important that the people that I talked to knew what I was doing with the information that they were providing me and allowing them to opt out of the process at any time. I provided contact emails and my office phone number and gave both time and space to address all questions and concerns both before and after the interviews and focus groups.

#### 2.5.1 VALIDITY

The discussions and publications around validity in mixed methods research have only recently started to gain the same type of attention as research on validity in qualitative and quantitative research (Timans et al., 2019). No matter what the research undertaken is, it is important to make sure that the research methods are valid. Joppe (2000) provides the following explanation of what validity is in research:



Validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. In other words, does the research instrument allow you to hit “the bull’s eye” of your research object? Researchers generally determine validity by asking a series of questions and will often look for the answers in the research of others. (p. 1)

I needed to be conscious of ‘design-implementation considerations such as: the range of people who are included (and excluded) from participation, researcher training and data gathering techniques, analytical and reflective processes, and the transparency of the reporting’ (Roller, 2017). Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) mention, ‘The arbiters of research quality will be the research stakeholders, which means that the quality or validity issue can have subjective, intersubjective, and objective components of influences’ (p. 46). It becomes clear that as Morgan (2007) suggests, researchers ‘need to achieve a sufficient degree of mutual understanding with not only the people who participate in our research but also the colleagues who read and review the products of our research’ (p. 73).

For the purpose of this study, the validity of the Assessment Experience Questionnaire, and the focus groups were developed and tested by the creators of TESTA: Jessop, El Hakim, and Gibbs.

According to the TESTA manual:

1. The quantitative components of this evaluation are based on an HEA-funded research project (Gibbs et al, 2007) that established methodologies for auditing assessment environments (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2009) and for measuring the way students respond to these assessment environments in their learning behaviour, using the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (Dunbar-Goddet and Gibbs, in press). The Assessment Experience Questionnaire successfully differentiates students’ learning responses between degree programmes and makes it possible to show how different assessment environments are associated with different student learning responses (Gibbs et al, in press).

2. The qualitative research uses student focus groups (each consisting of about six students) to provide a rich picture of student learning experience in relation to the assessment regime on a programme, before and after the pilot. Preferably the focus group candidates will be single honours students to ensure that their experience relates mainly to the programme under study. The focus group questions explore how students experience assessment, how assessment influences their learning behaviour, how they use feedback, and what sense they make of criteria. It will also explore issues like timeliness of feedback, variation in assessment modes, deep, surface and strategic approaches. Focus groups last for about one hour.

The foundations of research that aided in the creation of TESTA come from Gibbs and Simpson (2004), but reports detailing the process of the creation of the Assessment Experience Questionnaire have little to no details on supporting research. It is mentioned that the current AEQ incorporated elements of the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991) to help determine students' views on goal and standards. The AEQ went through three rounds of testing and was revised to measure environments for the entire programme rather than just individual modules. It is not as clear how the validity of the focus group questions was tested.

When creating the interview questions, I used Mason's (2002, p. 74) checklist to ensure the validity of the process. She writes that when designing research questions, the following need to be considered:

- Make sense to, or be meaningful to, the interviewees
- Be related to your interviewee's' circumstances, experiences and so on, based on what you already know about them
- Be sensitive to the interviewees, to their needs and rights, in accordance with your ethical position and moral practice (See ethical concerns later in the chapter for how this was done)

- Help the flow of the interview interaction – the ‘conversation with a purpose’ – rather than impede it
- Ensure an appropriate focus on issues and topics relevant to your research questions

The questions for the interviews with the programme leaders were developed with the help of my supervisory team and focused on the type of students the programme hoped to recruit, how the programme settled on the best way to assess the students, what ‘formative assessment’ means to them, and what they consider ‘good’ feedback. The programme leaders also had a chance to discuss what they were hoping to get from the programme audit and mention anything that they were curious to know about the assessment and feedback practices in the programme. The questions for the lecturers and module leaders were very similar in nature, with the addition of whether or not they felt that students could make connections between the various modules that they completed in the course of their degree programme. The interview questions all related directly to the overarching research questions for the current study. This became a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1988, p. 102).

In addition to the validity of the research methods, the validity of the data analysis was also important. For this research it meant triangulating the analysis with my supervisors. We discussed the interview transcripts, and the information that was being presented there, and discussed the codes that I wanted to use to help pull out the important points that the staff and students were trying to make about assessment and feedback. I was able to work through my thought process, and the codes were able to evolve as the conversations with my supervisors

took place. My Director of Studies contributed his expertise to support my analysis of the quantitative data.

### 2.5.2 GENERALISABILITY

*“Generalisation is concerned with the application of research results to cases or situations beyond those examined in the study.” (Collis & Hussey, 2010)*

For the purpose of this study it is hard to generalize the findings in work that is mostly qualitative in nature as trends and phenomenon that happen at all universities. ‘The goal of most qualitative studies is to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases’(Polit & Beck, 2010). With a growing evidence-based research environment. While the findings from this study may not be generalizable for all feedback practices at universities, it can provide an insightful snapshot of a culture (Miller & Glassner, 2011, p130), and might prove to be useful in a comparative study.

### 2.5.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

‘Ethical behaviour helps protect individuals, communities and environments, and offers the potential to increase the sum of good in the world’ (Israel & Hay, 2006, p.2). Because this research involves the participation of staff and students at the university, it is important to note some important ethical considerations. The first consideration was transparency and honesty with the research participants. When I had the initial meeting with the programme leaders, I made sure they had a complete understanding of both the TESTA methodology and the questions that I was exploring through the course of my research. I wanted the programme leaders to understand

both the risks and the rewards of being part of the research and have a chance to make decisions without any fear of negative consequences.

This same consideration was given to both students and module leaders and lecturers. Programme leaders and module leaders and lecturers provided verbal consent to be a part of the study by being interviewed. A short presentation was given to students before the survey was distributed, and students were told that the survey was completely voluntary, and that if they did not wish to complete the survey that was their right. Students who participated in the focus groups were given a consent form (See Appendix E) that included the purpose of the study, the role of the student in the research process, and how to get in contact with me should they have any concerns or questions. It was my intention that anyone who participated in the study did so with the utmost informed consent.

In addition to transparency, the other ethical concerns I was worried about centred around privacy and confidentiality. I sought and received ethical approval from Edinburgh Napier's university ethics committee. It was important that any identifying characteristics of both the programmes and the people within the programmes that agreed to speak with me were not released in any part of the study. All transcripts were anonymised. Names were changed, the programmes only identified as Programmes A through E, and any staff or student who did not wish to be recorded or have their details ascribed to their programme of study were respected. This was especially important for the students who were asked to discuss the best and worst types of feedback that they receive in the course of their programme. 'From a utilitarian ethical

perspective, the sum of potential benefits to a subject and the importance of the knowledge gained should outweigh the risk of harm to the subject and thus warrant a decision to carry out the study' (Kvale, 2011, p. 15) .The study went through ethical approval from Edinburgh Napier's university ethics committee, and met all of the rigorous research standards that the university mandates for those conducting research on campus.

## 2. 6 DATA ANALYSIS

### 2.6.1. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The interviews with staff and focus groups with the students were digitally recorded and transcribed. Two students asked that they not be recorded so a written transcription of key quotes was taken during the interview. Transcription was completed one to two days after the interview so that I would be more focused on what was actually being said rather than transcribing what I thought I remembered of the conversation. Once the transcriptions were completed, I reviewed them and edited them for accuracy. All participants were offered the opportunity to review a copy of the transcript for accuracy. The transcriptions were then anonymised, with names and any specific or defining characteristics changed to protect the privacy of the participants. I kept a password protected Excel spreadsheet with the programme, names of the people interviewed, and the pseudonyms given to each of the people. Each programme was labelled with a letter of the alphabet becoming Programmes A to E.

The interviews and focus groups were then coded thematically, but the themes were constructed as the transcripts were read, rather than the transcripts being read to fit into a certain set of pre-existing codes. The use of open coding (Gibbs, 2007) allowed me to read through the transcripts

to get to the heart of what was happening, and then match the responses with the other responses from staff, students, and programme leaders. 'This is the kind of coding where you examine the text by making comparisons and asking questions' (Gibbs, 2007, p. 50). I did not want to risk missing important responses by trying to read for specific categories, and I do not believe that I can create meaning on my own. While reading the transcripts, I let the words of the people interviewed help me construct the codes, and then found a way to make connections through the words that the interviewees used, and through conversations with my supervisors. This is not to say that I had no part in the framing of the data and the creation of the codes (Brown, 2005; Drake, 2010).

I was awarded ethical approval from Edinburgh Napier University to run the study and gained permission from the programme leaders to not only collect data on their programme, but to speak to staff and students. I was given access to programme handbooks, allowed to sit in on programme meetings, and allowed to audio record the interviews. In regard to staff and students, I obtained permission to collect audio recordings, and many of the staff brought examples of exams, and examples of feedback that they had provided for students (that had never been collected by the students).

#### *2.6.1.1 THE CODES*

'A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. The data can consist of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, literature, artefacts, photographs, video, websites, e-mail

correspondence, and so on' (Saldana, 2009). These codes aid the researcher in identifying patterns in the data. For this study, the codes were done a posteriori, and after an in-depth reading had been done of all of the transcripts. I wanted the words of the participants to come through, and really understand how they understood the process of feedback, and in the case of the students interviewed, how, or even if, they used feedback as a learning tool. As Merriam(1998) states, 'our analysis and interpretation and study's findings will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place' (p. 45). While my goal is to make sure that the voices of the participants are the strongest voices that come through in the study, my involvement in the design, data collection, and analysis is still a part of the research process. It is my position as a social constructivist, and my belief as a Critical Theorist that all voices should be heard that led me to create a set of interview questions for staff or made sure that the interviews were semi-structured so that participants could discuss matters not on the list of questions.

It is more than just the researcher's approach to qualitative inquiry (e.g., case study, ethnographic, phenomenological) and ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues that influence - and affect our coding decisions (Creswell, 2007; Mason, 2002). I knew that I was going to have to speak with my supervisors, have discussions with colleagues, and pay careful attention to the words that the interviewees were using to describe their experiences. This means sending transcripts to the person interviewed so they can review it for accuracy, and occasionally emailing follow-up questions to the participants in order to clarify meaning. This was done to ensure academic rigour in the analysis process. Without having those conversations



with my supervisors or colleagues, it would be very easy to ascribe my own reading of the transcripts to the analysis, which is merely one way the data could be interpreted.

As the principal researcher and the primary member working on the analysis, it was important for me to fully immerse myself in the transcripts and audio files so that I was familiar with what the staff and students had said to me, and to start to notice any trends or similarities that may link the transcripts together. This notion of connections started to take shape after the first interview was conducted. I was constantly reminded of fragments of conversations that I had with staff and students as I interviewed others, and that helped to clarify questions as well. I was able to ask students questions that staff had raised during the staff interviews centred around what students understood from the feedback they were given, and what might help them actively engage with the feedback in the future.

I started globally with general headings, and then pared them down to more specific themes. I was interested in the relationships between what was said by staff and students, staff to staff, students to students and the concepts relating to my research questions. The coding came from the parts of the transcripts that not only resonated with responses to my research questions, but also seemed to really say something important about feedback. These parts of the transcripts were linked to other parts of the other transcripts that fell into similar themes.

During the first read-through of the transcripts, I noted several very general themes that seemed to run through them. These categories allowed me to start separating the data and start to focus

on how all the interviews and focus groups not only related to each other but helped explore the research questions. Initially there were questions from my supervisory team about how vague and general these categories were as well as the language used to classify the categories. For initial sorting though, I was comfortable with the general categories that allowed me to start to group the data before I started to make deeper connections and create the actual codes that would be used to sort the data. These initial general headings were:

**Types of students:** This is descriptive information about the staff and students that participated in the study (to be put into a chart for Chapter Four) as well as descriptions of the types of students that the programmes hoped to recruit

**Formative Assessment Definition:** All of the people interviewed were asked to define formative assessment and feedback. Those answers were grouped together in order to better understand how people understand what formative feedback is.

**Feedback- Positive aspects from the student perspective:** This comes from when students discuss things that they like from the feedback they are getting, or when they speak about the things that they would like from the feedback that would help them make connections.

**Feedback- Negative aspects from student perspective:** This comes from when students speak about things that they do not like about the feedback they are getting, or the things that they think are missing from their feedback.

**Feedback- Positive aspects from staff perspective:** Same as with the students, this comes from when staff discuss what they felt made good feedback, as well as things they felt they did well in regards to their own feedback practices.

**Feedback- Negative aspects from staff perspective:** Same as with the students, this comes from staff mentioning negative aspects of feedback, and the problems that they see in trying to provide feedback, and what students do with the feedback.

**Feedback as a learning tool:** This comes from when both staff and students discuss whether or not the students use formative feedback, or in some cases, ever get formative feedback from their lecturers.

**Feedback as a learning tool staff perspective:** This comes from the discussion with staff on what feedback would need to look like in order for students to use it as a learning tool.

**Feedback as a learning tool student perspective:** This comes from the discussion with students about what they want from their feedback in order to help them learn from it and use on future assignments.

**Power Relationships:** Any discussion about the relationships between the staff and the students, and the potential barriers they have on students asking questions or engaging with feedback.

**Feedback as Dialogue:** Any discussion of whether or not students used the feedback as a reason to have a conversation with the lecturer, with their peers, or an internal dialogue

**The Purpose of Feedback:** Any discussion where staff or students mention what they think the purpose of feedback is in relation to their learning.

**Module Connections:** Any discussion that focuses on whether or not students make connections between the modules they complete in the course of their programme.

Once these categories had been determined, and quotes from the transcripts had been sorted, I was then able to focus closely on what the participants were saying and analyse how all the different voices fit together. These aforementioned general categories were narrowed into specific themes that supported the research questions as well as the data gathered from transcripts. These themes also considered the data that would be generated from the surveys as well. Within these themes, real codes were then established to help categorise the data that was generated from the interviews. The themes are detailed below. They are:

- Institutional acknowledgement of assessment and feedback practices
- What is the structure of the course?
- Is there a programme-focused approach to feedback and assessment?
  - If not, is there a sustained approach to feedback in the programme?
- Staff Attitudes toward feedback
- What role do students have in the feedback process?

#### 2.6.2 Quantitative Data

All the survey responses were input into Minitab 17. It is a general-purpose statistical software programme intended for easy interactive use with data sets. Data sets were created for each individual programme that participated in the study and then a larger data set was created in order to look at larger trends across the university. The first step in the data analysis was to

separate the survey data into their scaled categories. The questions were combined based on the scales created by TESTA and validated by Gibbs and Simpson (2004). The alpha (also referred to as Cronbach's Alpha) signifies internal consistency and is considered a measure of scale reliability. Technically speaking, Cronbach's alpha is not a statistical test – it is a coefficient of reliability (or consistency). As mentioned previously, it is unclear why the creators of the scales have not provided alphas for all of them.

They are:

- **Quantity of effort (alpha=0.69)**
- **Coverage of syllabus (alpha=0.85)**
- **Quantity and quality of feedback (alpha=0.61)**
- **Use of feedback (alpha=0.70)**
- **Appropriate assessment**
- **Clear goals and standards**
- **Surface Approach**
- **Deep Approach**
- **Learning from the examination (alpha=0.78)**
- **Satisfaction**

The second stage of analysis was to screen for missing data. Programme B was ultimately excluded from much of the hypothesis testing due to not only a low response rate, but a lack of identification of the year of study by the respondents. Once the data were in Minitab, there were four null hypotheses tested using analysis of variance. The null hypotheses were:

- There is no significant difference in the average 'use of feedback' factor among years
- There is no significant difference in the average 'programme level feedback' factor among different programmes.
- There is no relationship between the 'use of feedback factor' and overall satisfaction.
- There is no relationship between the 'quantity and quality of feedback' factor and overall satisfaction.

The first two of these hypotheses were examined using two-way ANOVA with an interaction term. The relationships between student satisfaction with the course and the two measures related to feedback, 'use of feedback' and 'quantity and quality of feedback' were examined using two separate one-way ANOVAs. Data were grouped into 'satisfaction categories' e.g. all students who reported an overall satisfaction score of 1, all those who reported 2 through to 5. These were used as levels of the 'satisfaction' to be tested against the factors 'use of feedback' and 'quantity and quality of feedback'. This approach was taken because data were too heteroscedastic when a regression was applied. Residuals were examined following all analyses and transformations were used where necessary.

## 2.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate my trustworthiness as a researcher by outlining and detailing of the research methods and procedures used in the course of this study; the ways in which I interpreted the data once it was collected; and my own theoretical perspective and the way in which it influenced the way in which I conducted my research. I have shared my critique of the TESTA methodology, and how my belief in critical theory led me to create a set of interview questions for module leaders and lecturers in order for their voice to be heard in this change process.

I have argued why programmes were selected in the way that they were, and why the semi structured interviews were used to help in the conversations with the programme leaders, module leaders, and lecturers. I have mentioned how my work within social constructivism was

used as a framework to gather, analyse and report the findings. I have tried to be as clear as possible about why I have chosen these perspectives, and how they have informed the process throughout.

## 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter detailed the methods and methodology that were used to construct this study. This chapter will focus on a critical analysis of literature around feedback practices in higher education. I will start by discussing power roles in the classroom as they relate to Critical Theory and feedback literacy. I will move the discussion onto detailing types of assessments. I will then shift to the definition of feedback used in this study. This will be followed by an in-depth discussion of feedback literacy followed by the literature around a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback and a discussion of power relationships in the classroom. This chapter will end with an acknowledgement of the gap in the field and how this study is working to fill that gap.

### 3.2 CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, PAULO FREIRE, IRA SHOR AND CRITICAL DEMOCRATIC POWER SHARING CLASSROOMS

In order to consider the role that power plays in a students' development of feedback literacy, it is essential to understand how Critical Theory works in an educational setting. Critical Theory will still be used in the discussion and the conclusion chapters to help frame what can be done to help students utilize feedback as a learning tool. The Critical Theory used for those chapters will be the Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy in the classroom. The focus of Critical Theory in the classroom shifts from the views of the Frankfurt school, and moves into post Marxist Critical Pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy is not a new construct. The concept can be traced back to Paulo Freire's (1972)

work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire built his theory using the foundations of Marxism and Critical Theory and seeks to change the way in which learning, and teaching are viewed.

Critical Pedagogy is concerned with:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (Shor, 1992, p. 129)

McArthur (2013) adds: 'theory is itself always a form of practice and practice always requires the input of thought or theory' (p. 44). Hence the distinction between theory and practice is itself suspect; she cautions, 'the whole concept of applying ideas or theories is misconceived' (p. 46). Critical Pedagogy then is not and should not be a one size fits all monolithic plan of practices and activities that someone can just pick up and implement. Instead, to change a situation using Critical Pedagogy requires a variety of collaborative work in a specific interrelated context, and sometimes even contradictory efforts made on the 'individual (micro), group (meso) and institutional or national (macro) levels of change' (p. 46).

Critical pedagogy structures education around a dialogic process between learning and teaching. It sets students up to question traditional power roles of teachers and students, and challenges learners to take an active role in their learning using questions and inquiry. It also has strong roots in social justice and the importance of education in bettering the lives of all people. Shor and Pari's (1999) article 'What is Critical Literacy?' offers another definition of critical literacy that is still widely used today. He writes, 'Critical literacy is pedagogy for those teachers and students



. . . who wish to act against the violence of imposed hierarchy, restrictiveness and forced hunger’ (p. 7). Critical Pedagogy is interested in what is not being said, and challenges both students and educators to look beyond the surface for deeper level meanings.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offered a critique of traditional teaching methods where ‘instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat’ (p. 72). This ‘banking model of education’ (Freire, 2000, p. 70) thus becomes a tool of oppression where the teachers have all of the power, and students are nothing more than empty vessels waiting to be filled with passive facts and memorisable answers.

Freire was inspired by socialist Karl Marx and activist and social justice warrior Franz Fanon, and based his own work on the notion that to be a revolutionary educator, teachers needed to help students learn to question the world around them and become functional human beings who think critically and learn to act of their own free will in order to fight against injustice and oppression. For Freire, true liberation for people comes from the ability to inquire about, reflect on, be conscious of, and most importantly, to act on the world around them in order to transform it (Freire, 2000, p. 79). For Freire, ‘knowledge emerges only through the invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, and with each other’ (Freire, 2000, p. 72). It is up to the educators to help their students become critical beings by first seeing them as capable of higher level thinking than as

equals in the process of learning, and then the teacher must trust that the students will use the skills and power they gain from this learning environment (Wilder, 2013).

Steiner and Rozen (as cited by Keller, 2003) published a study that showed that 'of 16 schools of education [used in the study]—14 of them among the top-ranked institutions in the country, according to U.S. News and World Report—and found that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was one of the most frequently assigned texts in their philosophy of education courses'. This suggests that Freire's method for educational change both has merits and can work within the classroom environment. The book:

mentions none of the issues that troubled education reformers throughout the twentieth century: testing, standards, curriculum, the role of parents, how to organize schools, what subjects should be taught in various grades, how best to train teachers, the most effective way of teaching disadvantaged students. (Stern, 2009)

However, this would be trying to make a connection between the book and education that is too literal. While the book mentions none of the above issues that plague education, it does not make it any less valuable for the educational setting. The *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was never meant to be limited to changing the attitudes strictly in a classroom setting. Freire's work was meant to challenge every aspect of living and interacting in the world. It was meant to change a way of living, to challenge those who were living in subservient roles to take charge of their learning, and change their position in society (Wilder, 2013). 'Thus, Freire's critical pedagogy is a socially constructed form of education, and one with social justice at its heart. Becoming critically conscious with the aim of participating in - not merely observing - society is the key' (Stone, 2012,

p. 40). Bartlett (2005) notes that educators and practitioners will need to thoroughly embrace and immerse themselves in Freirean theory, though, if they are going to be successful with critical pedagogies.

Freire's work was meant for a wider societal change, rather than one that was limited to a classroom. While many of the acts of oppression that Freire discussed were not necessarily ones that plagued educational settings, it did not stop academics from studying his work and finding ways to change educational environments. One such 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Dr Ira Shor, who worked in close collaboration with Paulo Freire, adapted critical pedagogy for the American classroom. The democratic element of Shor's theory comes from the work of John Dewey. Dewey (1963) believed that people will not only become passive students, but passive adults if they are forced to enter classrooms that have a strict hierarchical structure, where the teacher knows everything, and the student must just absorb the information.

### 3.3 PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment is one of the most important things students do while at university. It drives student learning and communicates to a student what information is most valuable in a module or in the course of a programme (Arnold, 2011; Fook & Sidhu, 2014; Sambell, 2016). Assessment falls into one of three categories:

- *Assessment of learning*: the type of assessment that helps confirm what students know. Assessment of learning include tests, quizzes and exams as well as portfolios.
- *Assessment for learning*: the type of assessment that confirms where students are in their learning and provides the opportunity for feedback and a chance for improvement. Formative assessment can be classified as assessment for learning.

- *Assessment as learning*: the type of assessment that the student creates and then is assessed on. The PhD process is an example of assessment as learning, where the student creates, executes, and then writes up their thesis and then participate in an oral examination with questions that are formed based on what is written in the thesis.

(Black & William, 1998; Earl, 2014; Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997; Brown, 2005)

The differences in these types of assessment are important because they help in determining the type of feedback that a student receives. The first type of assessment on the list often requires little to no feedback, while the other two provide ample opportunity for students to receive, and potentially act upon feedback. Students' responses to the National Students' Survey (NSS) demonstrate that assessment and feedback are the weakest part of the student experience at many universities. The scores for assessment and feedback have been persistently 10% lower than those for overall student satisfaction and the quality of teaching provision (Tomas & Jessop, 2019). There many reasons why students are dissatisfied with the assessment and feedback in their programmes. These reasons include: large class sizes and the effect they have on feedback (Calvo, Howard, and Markauskaite 2010; Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014); the perceived difference in the quality of feedback provided in various modules (Price, Handley, Millar, & O 'Donovan, 2010; Weaver, 2006);the reliance on assessment criteria and the lack of opportunity to be able to understand and then demonstrate those criteria (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2010).

### 3.4 POWER IN THE CLASSROOM

Within the context of Critical Theory, it is important to consider power roles in the classroom and what this means for the development of a students' feedback literacy. As Deeley and Bovill (2015)

note 'the conventional division between teachers and students can be understood as a social construction, reinforced by role expectations and assumptions' (p. 465). James and McInnes (2004) considered the ways in which exemplars, while normally seen in the literature as an important tool for guiding students through feedback, may hinder the learning if those exemplars position the tutor in a position of power as custodian and gatekeeper of institutional discourses. Within these assumptions is the notion of feedback as "truth" rather than an invitation to a dialogue with the marker about the issues. The use of present tense in the commentary also helps to construct the picture of the commentary as 'truth' (Hyatt, 2003)' (as quoted in Hyatt, 2005, p. 341). Students feel they cannot enter a dialogue about the feedback they receive because it has come from an authority figure and should therefore be the correct answer.

Hunt (2001) writes of an occurrence that is far too common among students who do not yet know the real purpose of feedback. She writes about harsh feedback she received during her PhD that affected her so profoundly that she felt that she did not have the intellectual capability to complete her studies. With the hierarchy in higher education being that the one providing the feedback is the one who knows all, scathing reviews, poorly written, and even inconsistent feedback can have a potentially damaging impact on the learner.

Feedback is often used to justify the overall mark, more for external markers than the students themselves (Li & De Luca, 2012). Spinks (1998) discussed that most of the relationship that develops between marker and student comes from the written feedback provided on the work. This relationship may be quite didactic, and can either bolster the student, or discourage them

from performing well on future tasks. Spinks (1998) considers the benefits of introducing students to the academic discourse community, and for having face-to-face conversations about the work with the students rather than just the one-sided exchange of a tutor presenting feedback to be taken as the final say.

To neutralise this, teachers need to create a learning environment that encourages active participation from the students. By allowing students a classroom environment that encourages them to become more critically engaged, the hope is that students will carry that critical engagement with them outside of the classroom and into society. Shor (1992) argues that providing these examples of critical thinking and learning to the students will help them expand their capabilities for questioning systems, institutions, and even social structures. Shor (1992) writes, 'Banks (1971) defined empowerment in terms of transforming self and society: 'A curriculum designed to empower students must be transformative in nature and help students develop the knowledge, skills and values needed to become social critics' (131)' (p. 16). The notion of empowering students, and whether current feedback practices allow students the opportunity or the skills to think about and utilise feedback as a learning tool, will be examined in the next chapter.

### 3.5 DEFINING FEEDBACK

Whilst most authors agree that feedback is a fundamental component of assessment (Hattie, & Timperley, 2007; Hester, 2001; Rowntree, 1987) there are multiple definitions and interpretations of the term. For example, Kulhavy (1977) defined feedback as any of the

multitude of techniques that are used to communicate to a learner if a response is right or wrong. More recently, feedback has been defined as ‘information about how the student’s present state (of learning and performance) relates to goals and standards’ (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). A common characteristic of the multitude of definitions is that feedback provides some illumination for the student on their performance for a given task. For the purpose of this study, feedback is defined as:

**A process whereby learners obtain information about their work ... in order to generate improved work** (Boud & Molloy, 2013, p. 6).

‘Implicit in this definition is that learners must take an active role to seek information, make sense of it and undertake subsequent tasks, to enable translation of newly constructed knowledge into practice’ (Henderson et al., 2019, p.2) This definition was chosen because it focuses on the key role feedback should have in the learning process. It defines the process of feedback as something that is not merely a justification of a mark, or that comes at the end of learning a task or skill, but rather as something to be used to improve future performance or understanding. This captures the dynamic, corrective nature of feedback found in the cybernetic roots of the term; for example, in the definition given by Ramaprasad (1983) of feedback as ‘information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter *which is used to alter the gap in some way*’ (italics added). Hence, feedback implies future change. In many circles (Wimshurst and Manning 2013; Murphy and Barry 2016; Hughes, Smith, & Creese 2015; Reimann, Sadler & Sambell, 2019), this forward-focused information is referred to as

‘feedforward’; here, I use the word ‘feedback’ since, as these early definitions imply, the term includes such ideas of responsive change in future work.

### 3.5.1 STAFF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE FEEDBACK PROCESS

Given the actual or perceived power hierarchy in higher education, feedback that is harshly critical, poorly written and even inconsistent can have a potentially damaging impact on the learner. Feedback is a staple component of modern higher education and is – or should be - a core component of learning (Bransford et al., 2000). Effective feedback practice must combine short term and long-term functions, helping students to learn and to change (Chappuis, 2012). While this is an important facet to feedback, there are still many people who still regard feedback as a transactional process rather than a dialogical process. The feedback they provide simply refers back to the work completed and does not provide comments to help students in the future (Price et al., 2010; Carless, 2006). This means that the affective elements stated by Xu and Carless (2017) are often ignored or difficult for staff to cope with. In order to help students develop their feedback literacy skills, the feedback literacy of staff needs to be a priority. As Xu and Carless (2017) note:

teacher feedback literacy as involving awareness and skills of three interconnected aspects: the role of feedback in developing student self-regulative capacities; strategies for supporting student cognitive development in understanding feedback and in generating useful feedback on one’s own and others’ work; and attentiveness to sociocultural, relational and affective aspects of feedback processes. The enabling construct of teacher feedback literacy is, therefore, the teacher’s awareness and skills of developing students’ cognitive and social-affective capacities necessary for effective feedback processes.

This means that it is not just a matter of staff giving students ‘good’ feedback, but about understanding the way in which students learn, their expectations from the feedback they

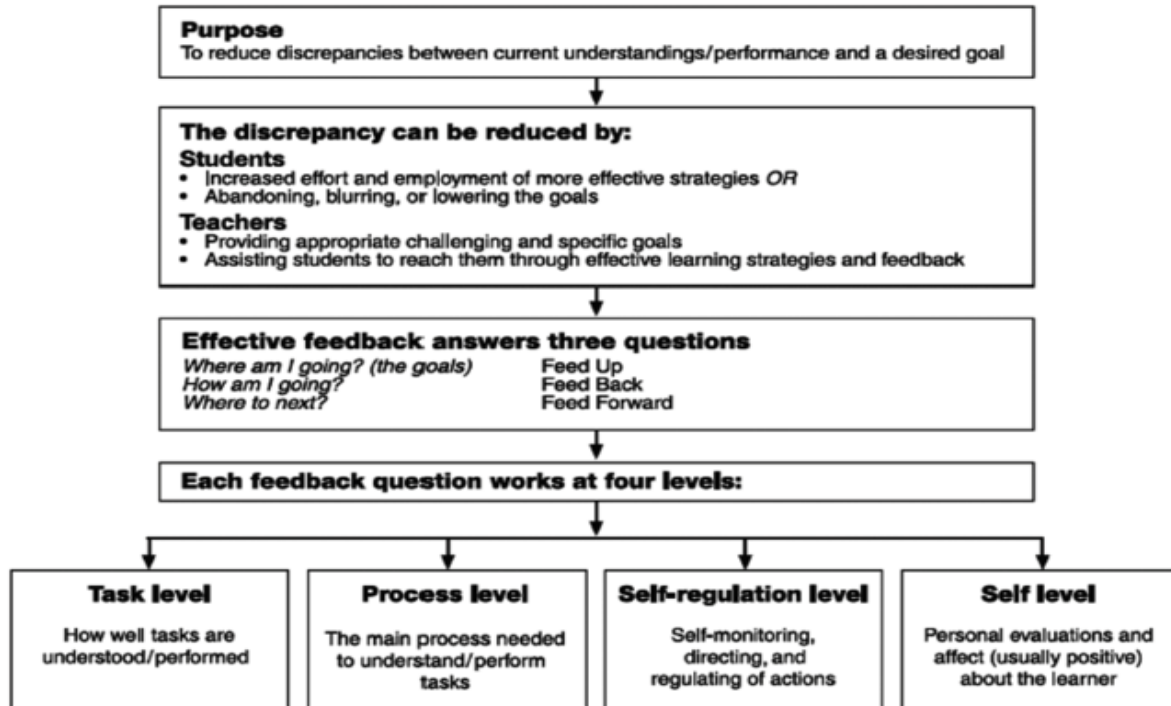


receive, and the 'need to look beyond the confines of feedback as a technical and time-bound product and explore students' perceptions of feedback within the broader context of their educational learning experience' (O'Donovan et al., 2019, p.10). While feedback is being reconceptualised, and there is a greater move toward feedback loops and feedback as dialogue, the higher education sector still has a long way to go in improving this area.

### 3.5.2 STYLES OF FEEDBACK

As Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 86) note, effective communication around assessments must answer three questions: Where am I going? (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), and Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?). Their model is as follows:

***Figure 3.1 Hattie and Timperley's Model of Feedback to Enhance Learning***



This model is based on using feedback to work for both the students and teachers and working through the four levels for each of the questions. Using this model, students and teachers work on narrowing the gap between current understanding and performance and a goal.

Hattie and Timperley’s model provides a clear map of how to provide feedback to students, but it involves the students taking an active role in the process. For some students, this could be a challenging task. Hattie and Timperley (2007) state that ‘less effective learners have minimal self-regulation strategies, and they depend more on external factors (such as teacher or the task) for feedback’ (94). This means that they are not as active in their learning process, and it means that the lecturer would have to provide feedback in different ways according to the skill sets of the learners. The success of this model of feedback is determined by the openness of the student to receive feedback, and the classroom environment/relationship with the lecturer. This can be

hard to achieve if the students do not feel comfortable with the power relationship between themselves and the lecturer. This means that students may not be able to find their voice or control over their education (Freire, 1970; Kirk et al., 2016). Power relationships will be discussed later in the chapter.

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2007) focus on self-regulation and motivation as well. For them good feedback practice had seven characteristics:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Many practitioners start with these seven guidelines to help create a foundation of good feedback practice (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Race, 2014; Yang & Carless, 2012). In designing sustainable feedback practices, it is crucial to consider the kinds of learning that higher education is intended to cultivate. In their future lives and roles, learners will need to work effectively on problems which are complex and unpredictable, and which require inter-disciplinary approaches (Barnett, 2007; Cantor et al., 2015). Some of the challenges which graduates will encounter–

such as social inequality, environmental crises and conflict – may also bring together fundamentally incompatible value positions (Barnett, 2007). Cantor et al. (2015) describe these messy real-world problems with no single solution and multiple diverse stakeholders as ‘wicked’ problems. These problems can legitimately be viewed through many lenses, with the viewpoint of the stakeholder determining the possible outcomes. In this context, assessment must prepare students to evaluate their own and others’ work in relation to complex, unpredictable and contextually sensitive situations (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Of course, students must graduate with practical skills, but to deserve the title of a higher education, they should also, in the words of Italian critic Norberto Bobbio, understand and express ‘the value of enquiry, the ferment of doubt, a willingness to dialogue, a spirit of criticism, moderation of judgement, philological scruples and a sense of the complexity of things’ (Eagleton, 2005, p. 12). Where Higher Education systems adopt approaches to feedback that suggest simple, linear solutions, or imply that there is one system that will work for everyone regardless of their situation, they are failing in their responsibility to prepare students for this challenging future.

Hendricks and Quinn (2007) have noted the way in which lecturers’ comments can aid learners gaining authority in academic writing through learning how to use the voices of others to develop their own voice, and by helping students through the processes of clarification and focussing. This can be misleading though, if students are merely copying a voice and style without the understanding of why or how it works in a given situation. Chanock (2002) looked at the problem of students misunderstanding written feedback. What she noticed in her examination of tutor comments was that the common tutor comment was that work has ‘too much description or

narration, and not enough analysis' (p. 96). The students' lack of understanding of the term 'analysis' led to their feeling perplexed and disheartened in several the instances studied (40-50% of those who received the comment). Also, 23% of the students overall expressed that they wished for more detailed feedback that explained what they should have done to avoid error. This feedback is not conducive to students' learning. Further, even when more content rich feedback is given, students may not understand the comments they are receiving (Beaumont et al., 2011; Rodway-Dyer et al., 2011). Lea and Street (1998) note that the expectations of written work are often context and discipline specific, yet can remain implicit, and that the vocabulary and terms that lecturers use in their guidance and feedback are often impenetrable. Students then spend their time focusing on the mark they receive, and even if they are reading the guidance and feedback, they are often doing little with these (Ding 1998; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Higgins et al. 2010). Students tend to have an understanding of what the mark means because it is used across the board to make comparative judgements, whilst formative feedback does not share that feature. This leaves both students and teachers frustrated (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Yang and Carless 2012). Without the proper introduction and familiarity with the academic discourse (such as the meaning of the word *analysis*), there is little to no chance for the student to be able to look to the feedback as a learning tool.

When students enter higher education, in addition to the changes in class structures, assignments, and lecture types, they must also make the transition to a more sophisticated vocabulary than they are previously used to. The problem is that many lecturers either feel that they are clear in the definitions and the usage of the new vocabulary, or because using such

vocabulary is second nature to them, do not realize that their students are often left confused or unsure about what is being said (Eraut, 2006; Koh, 2008).

A lack of appropriate academic vocabulary is not the only barrier to understanding and using feedback though. As Deeley and Bovill (2015) note 'the conventional division between teachers and students can be understood as a social construction, reinforced by role expectations and assumptions' (p. 465). As Bakhtin (1984) states, "truth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p. 110). This means that truth is created through conversation and interaction and it is not something that can happen if there is social isolation. James and McInnes (2004) considered the ways in which exemplars, while normally seen in the literature as an important tool for guiding students through feedback, may hinder the learning if those exemplars position the tutor in a position of power as custodian and gatekeeper of institutional discourses. Within these assumptions is the notion of feedback as "truth" rather than an invitation to a dialogue with the marker about the issues. The use of present tense in the commentary also helps to construct the picture of the commentary as 'truth' (Hyatt, 2003)' (as quoted in Hyatt, 2005, p. 341).

Research has shown that there needs to be (and now is) a shift from that type of feedback to feedback for learning that repositions feedback in four ways as addressed by Boud and Molloy (2013, p.711):

- (1) From an act of teachers to an act of students in which teachers are part (from unilateral to co-constructed; from monologue to dialogue).
- (2) From the almost exclusive use of teachers to that of many others (from single source to multiple sources).
- (3) From an act of students as individuals to one that necessarily implicates peers (from individualistic to collectivist).
- (4) From a collection of isolated acts to a designed sequence of development over time (from unitary items to curriculum).

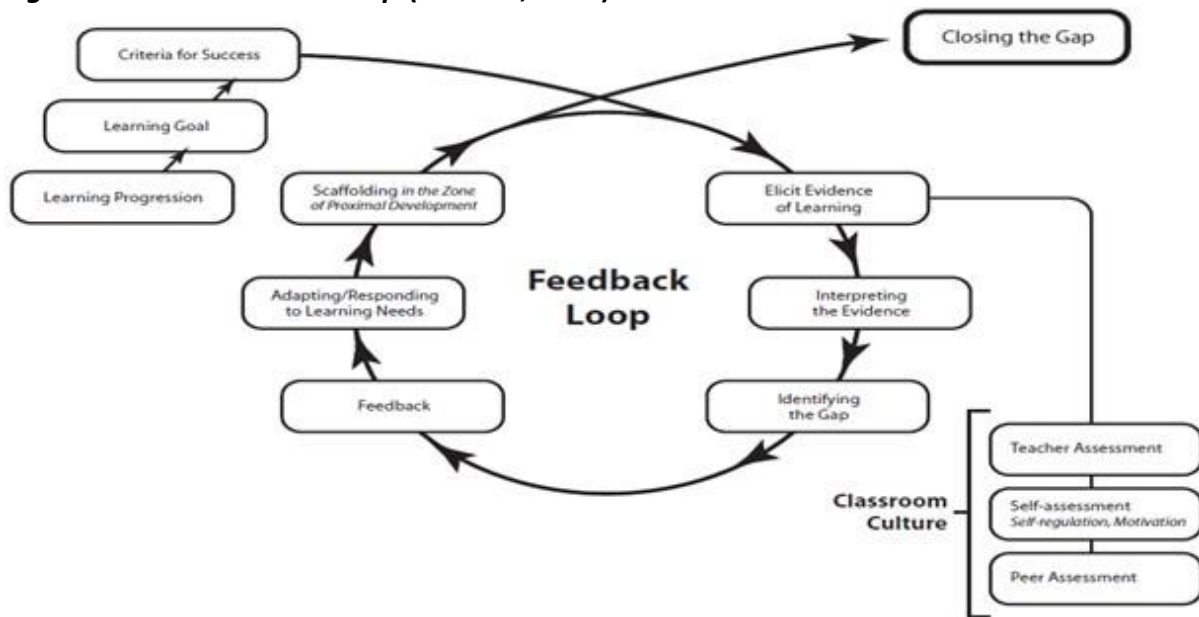
Number four on the list supports the role of programme level feedback and is especially important for the development of feedback literacy.

As the authors go onto write:

we suggest that the focus of feedback has to shift. Teachers need better quality information about student learning than they have been getting, and students need to better exercise their skills in eliciting the kinds of information they need. These are still feedback processes, but ones that are mutually constructed and co-dependent. The measures of success also change in this shift. They move from a prime focus on timely and detailed information to one in which the focus is on the appropriateness of timing and the nature of information for fostering self-regulation (p. 711)

This means that feedback practices should focus on feedback loops. The feedback loop was created in part from the 1880s theories by Braun and Le Chatelier. Braun and Le Chatelier worked with the concept of equilibrium and how systems respond to change and stimuli and eventually create a new balance. The feedback loop as used in the classroom was adapted from this model (Watson, 2003).

**Figure 3.2 The Feedback Loop (Watson, 2003)**



Feedback loops are created to help make sure that students are utilising the feedback they receive. The hope in creating the loop is to get students to engage with the process, and to make changes, enhance learning based on the feedback that they receive. It is considered successful when the loop is closed, and the feedback is acted upon (*Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, 2006*). The feedback loop requires more time to follow-up with students and determine if they not only understood the feedback, but have utilised it to help them with future learning (Watson, 2003).

Boud and Molly (2013) argue that what is needed is not new types of feedback styles, but rather new ways to think about the presentation of feedback. He devised what he calls generations of feedback, and what should occur in each of those generations. This model is more of a focus on what the learners do rather than what the teachers do. It also insists on a change in curriculum to try and bridge the gap that is sometimes found between teaching and learning. While this is



important and goes a long way to helping students become autonomous learners, it is important to consider the role of the teacher in this process. The process of becoming feedback literate and an autonomous learner can be done without the support of the teacher, but the process is much easier to work through with the support and guidance from the ‘experts’ in the room.

**Figure 3.3 Boud’s Feedback Mark 0, Mark 1, and Mark 2**

	<b>Feedback Mark 0</b>	<b>Feedback Mark 1</b>	<b>Feedback Mark 2</b>
<b>Approach</b>	Conventional	Behavioural/cognitive	Agentic
<b>Locus</b>	Teacher initiated	Teacher-driven	Learner-driven
<b>Features</b>	Taken-for-granted act of teacher/assessor	Closed system Classic feedback Tight loop	Open system Adaptive/responsive
<b>Location</b>	At end of teaching sequence	During learning	During learning and beyond
<b>Effects</b>	Effects not detected directly	Effects closely monitored by teachers	Effects monitored by teachers and learners
<b>Learner involvement</b>	No student involvement needed	Student involvement in response to specific stimulus	Student engagement intrinsic to process—dialogic
<b>Information provided</b>	Information provided not influenced by effects	Information provided changes in response to immediate effects	Information provided changes in response to effects
<b>Goal</b>	Study improvement	Task performance improvement	Judgement performance improvement
<b>Feedback loop</b>	None explicitly	Single loop	Double loop

Feedback Mark 0 would be what Freire (1970) would call the banking model of education, where students do not need to become active participants in the learning process, but instead, leave the knowledge process up to the lecturer. The majority of feedback given is at the Feedback Mark 1 level (Boud & Molloy, 2013) . This means that most of the work is still done by the lecturer, with a vague hope that the students take the feedback into account. It does not require a response

from students though, so there is no way to determine whether students are engaged in the process. This requires a lot of work on the part of the lecturer as they are the ones that must provide the feedback and take stock of the situation. The learner is completely dependent on the lecturer and does not provide sustainable learning tools for students. This perpetuates a power structure where the lecturer has control and does most of the work in the process.

Getting to Feedback Mark 2 can be difficult because it depends on a learning environment that allows for continuous improvement and affords students with ample opportunity for students to seek out knowledge and understanding and apply their learning in context. As Boud and Molloy (2013) write:

Such an environment is fostered by considerations at all levels from formal assessment tasks and requirements to the configurations of teaching and learning spaces, the gestures of teachers, the questions of learners and teachers and the climate of cooperation between students. These learning environments do not come ready made but need to be constructed not only by individual teachers responsible for courses, but also by staff and students working together to construct suitable milieu. The prime characteristic of the necessary learning milieu for this conception of feedback is that it is one in which dialogue flourishes (708)

Carless, Salter, Yang, and Lam (2011) stated that in order to really become grounded in this knowledge of feedback and how it relates to learning, students need to be able to engage with dialogue about how to evaluate their own work. They need to be able to learn about what makes quality work and how they can enact it. The dialogue also serves as a chance for students to clarify the assignment criteria and explore how it looks in the context of their work. This dialogue need not just be something that happens face-to-face, or even just as one-on-one conversations. All interactions that students have whether it is with their lecturer, with their

peers, or even a dialogue with themselves is important to help them understand what is potentially needed for improved action.

### 3.4.3 STUDENT BARRIERS TO FEEDBACK

One of the biggest barriers to using feedback as a learning tool is students' engagement with the feedback that they receive Winstone, Nash, Rowntree, and Parker (2017). The type of feedback suggested in Mark 2, and the type of feedback and learning that comes from engaging with feedback as a dialogue is that the students in these situations are expected to be agentic learners. These are learners that are 'pro-active and engaged in making meaning and developing capacities in ways that are intentional, effortful and are actively criticality in constructing their knowledge' (Billett 2009, p. v). This is potentially problematic as many students understanding of feedback comes from past experience, which often situates feedback as a one-way process. As Noble et al. (2019) write about students who participate in job placements as part of their study:

These experiences tended to be university based (e.g., assignment feedback), and a one-way process where they waited for feedback to be "done to them". All students reported not receiving any guidance or instruction on how to engage with feedback processes from their university educators or clinical supervisors, before going on placement. At best, some participants were advised by their university educators to seek feedback when on placement (p. 2)

The lack of engagement with feedback can also come from the characteristics of the feedback provided, of the task that students are asked to complete, and even the teacher instruction (Boud & Molloy, 2013a; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Shute, 2007; Han & Xu, 2019). Engagement with

feedback can also be low if students have a low motivation, do not believe they need feedback, or have prior knowledge on how to use feedback (Hattie et al., 2007; Pitt & Norton, 2017; Sadler, 2010; Butler & Winne 1995; Storch & Wigglesworth 2010; Busse 2013).

### 3.5 FEEDBACK LITERACY

One of the potential reasons that students chose not to engage with their feedback is their moderate to low feedback literacy (Carless, 2019). Building on the model of academic literacy, Sutton (2012) conceptualised feedback literacy as

‘the ability to read, interpret, and use written feedback’, which involves an epistemological dimension (knowledge building), an ontological dimension (identity construction), and a practical dimension (cognition and actions occurring in the use of feedback). (p. 31)

Sutton’s early defining of the term feedback literacy included the students unpacking and understanding the expectations of their lecturer in relation to their own academic identity as a student. This is further challenged if the feedback challenges the student to examine their own way of knowing and interacting with their learning. Carless and Boud (2018) built on Sutton’s (2012) definition. Their definition will serve as the definition of feedback literacy for this study.

They define feedback literacy as:

the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies. Students’ feedback literacy involves an understanding of what feedback is and how it can be managed effectively; capacities and dispositions to make productive use of feedback; and appreciation of the roles of teachers and themselves in these processes. (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1316)

For students, feedback literacy is part of the learning process that allows students to:

...reach the standard of disciplinary knowledge indicated in module and programme learning outcomes, subject bench marks etc; that assists learners in forming judgements concerning what counts as valid knowledge within particular disciplines; and that helps them develop the ability to assess the quality of their own and others' work. (Han & Xu, 2019)

This means that feedback literacy is more than just being able to read and understand the written comments provided by lecturers or peers, but to be able to make value judgements on their own work based on the feedback and work toward improved future work.

Carless and Boud, (2018, p. 1319) go on to list the specific characteristics of a feedback literate student. These students are:

### **Appreciating feedback**

Feedback literate students:

- (1) understand and appreciate the role of feedback in improving work and the active learner role in these processes;
- (2) recognise that feedback information comes in different forms and from different sources;
- (3) use technology to access, store and revisit feedback.

### **Making judgments**

Feedback literate students:

- (1) develop capacities to make sound academic judgments about their own work and the work of others;
- (2) participate productively in peer feedback processes;
- (3) refine self-evaluative capacities over time in order to make more robust judgments.

### **Managing affect**

Feedback literate students:

- (1) maintain emotional equilibrium and avoid defensiveness when receiving critical feedback;
- (2) are proactive in eliciting suggestions from peers or teachers and continuing dialogue with them as needed;
- (3) develop habits of striving for continuous improvement on the basis of internal and external feedback.

### **Taking action**

Feedback literate students:

- (1) are aware of the imperative to take action in response to feedback information;
- (2) draw inferences from a range of feedback experiences for the purpose of continuous improvement;
- (3) develop a repertoire of strategies for acting on feedback.

In addition to the skills listed above, students need to acquire tacit knowledge of the feedback processes so that they can make judgements and have the skills and understanding of how to make changes in their work during the production process (Carless & Boud, 2018). The tacit knowledge is not easily communicated directly. The tacit knowledge can be gained through observation, participation and the chance to practice, and through dialogue (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010).

To be feedback literate, students need to engage with feedback for knowing, and this type of feedback is often formative in nature. Formative feedback offers guidance and suggestions for enhancements for a students' academic performance. As Batchelor (2006, p. 790) writes: 'openness to the possibility of movement and development' and a 'process to be activated'. This means that the role of feedback as something valuable to the learning and teaching process is one worth highlighting.

While the research supports the notion that feedback is important, in order to fully recognise the value of feedback, and its function in the learning process, there would need to be a considerable shift in the culture of higher education. Significant time and space would need to be given to feedback, and it would need to be built into the curriculum. As Carless and Boud (2018) write:

This would help raise the status of feedback, enabling it to become a highly valued resource by both academics and learners, and also help feedback to become more securely embedded in institutional structures and strategies (Hounsell, 2007). Whereas learners appear to be able to engage with feedback on knowing, engagement with feedback for knowing is more challenging. This research study suggests that the grade is the prism through which feedback is read (Sutton & Gill, 2010). However, grades are polysemic: they signify different meanings to different students. As Havnes and McDowell (2008) argue, learners are social agents who actively construct the meaning of and response to feedback.

This shift in thinking, the prioritising of feedback as a component of curriculum design should be the focus on feedback research. What this means though is that feedback literacy is not just a skill that is important to students, but important to staff as well. This acknowledgement of the student learning process is important because many students come to their first year of university without the necessary understanding of the assessment process and will require some guidance around expectations (Beaumont et al., 2011).

### 3.6 PROGRAMME FOCUSED APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

If we return to the notion of students as passive learners as detailed in this chapter, it is not just what happens in the classroom that determines how students engage with learning. The potential impact of feedback on future practice and the development of students' identity as learners were highlighted by Eraut (2006):

When students enter higher education . . . the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence, we need to know much more about how their learning, indeed their very sense of professional identity, is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on feedback. (p. 118)

The best way to aid in this process is to build a dialogue between the student and lecturer (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). Within the socio-constructivist paradigm, feedback is seen as a learning tool when students are able to understand the comments and make revisions and have a conversation with the lecturer about the changes that need to be made (Archer, 2010). This dialogue between student and lecturer becomes essential for the continual learning of the student but can also serve as a learning tool for the lecturer. There is a lot to be learned through the participation in shared experiences (Carless et al., 2011). Shor (1992) is quick to state that a dialogic approach is not merely a free-for-all in the classroom, but rather, 'balances the authority and expertise of the teacher with the culture and language of the students' (p.104). For the pedagogical theory of Freire, dialogue is an essential aspect of education, and promotes a practice of freedom.

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (p. 53).

Freire proposes that power balances are characteristic of problem posing pedagogies, especially when teachers are viewed as the ones who hold all the knowledge that students should aspire to obtain. He argues that dialectical opposition to those knowledges can be produced through the student-teacher and teacher-student interaction. This aids students in the development of critical thinking skills. Freire writes: 'In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves;



they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation' (Freire, 1970, p. 64).

Therefore, involving the students in the process of creating assessments, or teaching them to use the feedback and take an active part in the process is important. There are many studies that support the notion of a critical democratic power sharing classroom supports deeper learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Deeley, 2014; Healey, Flint, and Harrington, 2014; Sambell & Graham, 2011; Stefani, 1998). This partnership that is created between staff and students shifts the traditional power roles and allows the students the chance to have a voice in their education and the learning process. This shift in thinking is not just political, but what about thinking about what is best for the students educationally. As Huxham, Hunter, McIntyre, Shilland, and McArthur (2015) state, 'For example, when all decisions about assessments are made by the tutor there is no mutual ownership of the risks involved' (p.534 ). The mutual ownership can also help encourage students to take a deep approach to learning. 'One involves relating ideas and looking for patterns or principles, while the other concentrates on checking evidence and examining the argument closely' (Entwistle et al, 2001). When students are engaged in the meaningful (instead of rote) learning, students can start to explore the possibility of becoming critical thinkers and critical social beings outside the classroom (Barnett, 2007; Freire, 2003; hooks, 1994).

Feedback needs to be considered in the context of the relationship between the student and the lecturer and the lecturer and their colleagues. If the goal of feedback, and feedback literacy is that students are not only exposed to a wide variety of feedback types, but that they also have

an understanding of how to use that feedback as a learning tool, then it is important that the feedback students receive contains an element of consistency throughout the course of the degree programme. Students often fail to engage with the feedback in a way that will help facilitate learning for subsequent tasks. This lack of engagement is well documented in the literature (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Handley, Price, & Millar, 2011; Sinclair & Cleland, 2007; Wood & Su, 2017), and the explanations for it are many and sometimes contradictory. It is argued that a serious barrier to students' constructive engagement with feedback is that they often lack feedback literacy and the proper tools and opportunities needed to actively engage with the feedback that they receive (Winstone et al., 2016; Withey, 2013). Students need to understand the process before they can fully engage with it.

What is needed to aid in successful communication around feedback is a higher-level perspective; a programme level approach which builds on the current module level focus. This approach includes structuring feedback practices so that students can make connections between current feedback and tasks in subsequent modules, and teaching students how to use the feedback they are given in useful and meaningful ways. Adopting this high level, programme-focussed approach to assessment is the informing philosophy for the Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) methodology. TESTA focuses on looking at the environments in which assessments and associated feedback contributes to further learning (Skinner, 2014). Research using the TESTA methodology has found that the modular approach to curriculum design, which is intended to provide greater freedom of choice for students in constructing their own programmes, can have serious negative effects on learning. A 'containerisation' of learning

is implied, with modules becoming conceived as stand-alone learning, teaching and assessment units. This has resulting in a preponderance of summative assessments over formative, with the modular system 'having deleterious effects on assessment design and student learning through an emphasis on the module's assessment rather than the coherence of the whole programme's assessment diet' (Jessop and El Hakim, 2012).

This lack of coherence makes it difficult for students to learn from feedback and see it as something that can be taken on to help in subsequent tasks. A programme level perspective will allow students to see the connections and, as Jessop et al. (2014) note, understand that an 'undergraduate degree is subject to a curriculum design process where the 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts' (p. 74). It is also important to give close attention to the whole guidance and feedback cycle. This includes beginning with the initial written or verbal guidance students are given before an assessment task and considering all of the communication around the assignment until students have finished processing their feedback (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008; McCune & Rhind, 2014).

Such a programme level approach to feedback has the potential to fit assessment practices to the challenges of the modern world. Specifically, our practices need to: contribute to building students' courage and capacity for creative problem solving and critical analysis (Sutton, 2012; Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson, & Panadero, 2018). When students are working outside the four walls of the university, they will not always be told how to complete a task they are given, and they will need to be able to make decisions on their own and be able to complete their work

independently. The programme level approach to feedback also need to contribute to students' resilience in the face of uncertainty and setbacks; and support students to learn how to evaluate their own and others' work in complex situations and to provide students with constructive feedback (Cantor et al. 2015; Carless, 2015). This can be challenging as students sometimes take constructive feedback as a personal attack and can become defensive (Robinson, Pope, and Holyoak, 2013; To, 2016; Pitt and Norton, 2017). 'If a trusting atmosphere is established, learners are more likely to develop the confidence and faith to reveal what they do not fully understand' (Carless & Boud, 2018).

In order to best support the needs of these learners, programmes need to move away from the quick fixes and standardised packages that are currently prominent features in feedback cultures. The aim is to help academics work toward achieving a dialogue that aids the students' progression in their learning from one module to the next and encourages the development of autonomous learners (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Boud & Molloy, 2013b; Crimmins et al., 2016; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Lowe et al., 2013; D. Nicol, 2010; Orsmond et al., 2013). This means that there will be a shift in the power hierarchies that students often feel are in place. The dialogue will help in balancing the power and placing students on staff on a more equal plain.

### 3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed power roles in the classroom as they relate to Critical Theory and feedback literacy. It then gave a definition of feedback and feedback literacy and ended with an exploration of why a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback is important when

considering how to help students attain feedback literacy. This chapter established that feedback is far from a simple and needs to be thought of as more than just a 'banking' model that fills students' heads with the right answers. Feedback instead involves dialogic and affective sophistication. To be able to achieve this, feedback literacy needs to be obtained by both students and teachers. To be able to achieve consistency in the process and develop literacy skills over time, a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback needs to be in place. The next chapter will present the qualitative findings from the interviews and focus groups with programme leads, module leaders, lecturers and students as well as the surveys completed by the students in each of the participating programmes.

# 4 FINDINGS

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore and analyse the findings collected across five programmes at Edinburgh Napier University. The chapter will start with a description of the data collected, followed by a presentation of the survey results from the Assessment Experience Questionnaire. It will then move onto a discussion of Edinburgh Napier University's institutional guidance of assessment and feedback practices. Following this, the chapter will be broken into five subchapters (labelled 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, and 4E) to present case studies of each of the participating programmes. The use of subchapters is employed so that the data constructed from each participating programme is showcased. Each case study will be presented in relation to the themes discussed in Chapter Two.

The themes are:

- What is the structure of the course?
- Is there a programme-focused approach to feedback and assessment?
  - If not, is there a sustained approach to feedback in the programme?
- Staff Attitudes toward feedback
- What role do students have in the feedback process?

The data presented will consist of the responses from the Assessment Experience Questionnaire as well as the interviews with the programme leader and lectures on the programme as well as the focus groups and interviews with the students from each of the programmes. The start of each case study will provide a brief description of the programme as well as the mapping of the assessments and feedback for all modules that are part of the programme. It will then move on to presenting and analysing the data generated from each of the programmes. This will be framed to map to the research objectives discussed in Chapter Two.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which student feedback literacy can be explored at the programme level. This exploration will include programme characteristics that can help or hinder the development of feedback literacy.

The research questions for this study are:

- How can programme design influence the development of feedback literacy over time?
- How do assessment and feedback practices impact on the development of feedback literacy over time?

#### 4.2 DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

A summary of demographic data for students completing the Assessment Experience Questionnaire is shown in Table 4.1. Each programme’s participant demographics were broken down by number of respondents, year of study, gender and age. Programme A had the most respondents at 192 and Programme B had the fewest respondents at 10. This ultimately led to the responses from Programme B being excluded from the quantitative analysis.

*Table 1* **Programme Statistics for Students Completing the Assessment Experience Questionnaire**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Total Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
Programme A	192	1 <sup>st</sup> : 112 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 41 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 0 4 <sup>th</sup> : 23	Male: 92 Female: 97 Other: 0 N/R: 3	17-21: 165 22-30: 24 31+: 3

		N/A: 16		
Programme B	10	1 <sup>st</sup> : 0 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 0 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 0 4 <sup>th</sup> : 0 N/R: 10	Male: 2 Female: 8 Other: 0	17-21: 3 22-30: 5 31+: 2
Programme C	19	1 <sup>st</sup> : 2 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 16 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 1 4 <sup>th</sup> : 0	Male: 2 Female: 14 Other: 1 N/R: 2	17-21: 12 22-30: 4 31+: 1 N/A: 2
Programme D	73	1 <sup>st</sup> : 32 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 19 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 18 4 <sup>th</sup> : 4	Male: 49 Female: 23 Other: 0 N/R: 1	17-21: 59 22-30: 13 31+: 1
Programme E	159	1 <sup>st</sup> : 90 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 0 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 0 4 <sup>th</sup> : 69	Male: 60 Female: 99 Other: 0	17-21: 119 22-30: 38 31+: 2
<b>Total</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup>: 236</b> <b>2<sup>nd</sup>: 76</b> <b>3<sup>rd</sup>: 19</b> <b>4<sup>th</sup>: 96</b> <b>N/A: 26</b>	<b>Male: 205</b> <b>Female: 241</b> <b>Other: 1</b> <b>N/R: 6</b>	<b>17-21: 358</b> <b>22-30: 84</b> <b>31+: 9</b> <b>N/A: 2</b>

The demographics of the interviews and focus groups, and written comments from students are shown in Table 4.2. For each programme the total number of staff and students are listed as well as the year of study for the students and the gender classification of all interview participants. The ratio between male and female respondents is evenly distributed, with students in their second year of study serving as the majority of participants interviewed or providing a written comment at the bottom of the AEQ.



**Table 2 The demographics of the staff and students interviewed and the students who provided written comments on the assessment experience questionnaire**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Total number interviewed</b>	<b>Year of Study (students only)</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Programme A	Staff:3 Students:14	1 <sup>st</sup> : 2 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 10 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 4 <sup>th</sup> : 2	Male: 7 Female:10
Programme B	Staff: 2 Students:5	1 <sup>st</sup> : 2 <sup>nd</sup> :5 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 4 <sup>th</sup> :	Male: 2 Female:5
Programme C	Staff:2 Students:1	1 <sup>st</sup> : 2 <sup>nd</sup> :1 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 4 <sup>th</sup> :	Male:1 Female:2
Programme D	Staff: 1 Students:18	1 <sup>st</sup> :4 2 <sup>nd</sup> :12 3 <sup>rd</sup> :2 4 <sup>th</sup> :	Male:12 Female:7
Programme E	Staff: 1 Students: 10	1 <sup>st</sup> :2 2 <sup>nd</sup> : 3 <sup>rd</sup> : 4 <sup>th</sup> :8	Male: 2 Female:9
<b>Total:</b>	<b>Staff: 9 Students:48</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup>: 8 2<sup>nd</sup>: 28 3<sup>rd</sup>: 2 4<sup>th</sup>: 10</b>	<b>Male: 24 Female: 33</b>

While the total number of students is listed as 48, only 14 students were interviewed. The other 34 students noted in the chart are ones who provided a written comment at the end of the AEQ. Students who were interviewed will be noted by their pseudonym, while the students who provided written comments will be noted as ‘Student, programme (A-E)’. Below is a list of the people interviewed and their pertinent data (Table 4.3).

**Table 3 Study participants who were interviewed. All names are pseudonyms, those with fore and surnames are staff**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Programme</b>
Christopher Cortez	Programme Lead	A
Jackson James	Lecturer	A
Jonathon Smith	Lecturer	A
Catriona	1 <sup>st</sup> year student	A
Leigh	1 <sup>st</sup> year student	A
Charles	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student	A asked not to be recorded
Carrie	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student	A asked not to be recorded
Diane	4 <sup>th</sup> year student	A
Brook	4 <sup>th</sup> year student	A
Brandon Davis	Programme Lead	B
Michelle Sanders	Lecturer	B
Matthew Dean	Programme Lead	C
Kelly Watson	Lecturer	C
Bradley Younger	Lecturer	D
Richard Alexander	Programme Lead	E
Kelsey	4 <sup>th</sup> year student	E
Ivan	4 <sup>th</sup> year student	E
Laura	4 <sup>th</sup> year student	E
Karen	1 <sup>st</sup> year student	E
Nora	1 <sup>st</sup> year student	E
Jade	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student	Asked that their programme not be identified
Cecile	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student	Asked that their programme not be identified
Toni	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student	Asked that their programme not be identified
Elizabeth	2 <sup>nd</sup> year student	Asked that their programme not be identified
Lorraine	4 <sup>th</sup> year student	Asked that their programme not be identified
Dominick	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student	Asked that their programme not be identified

Programme A comes from the Business School, Programmes B and E come from the School of Applied Sciences, and Programmes C and D come from the School of Arts and Creative Industry.

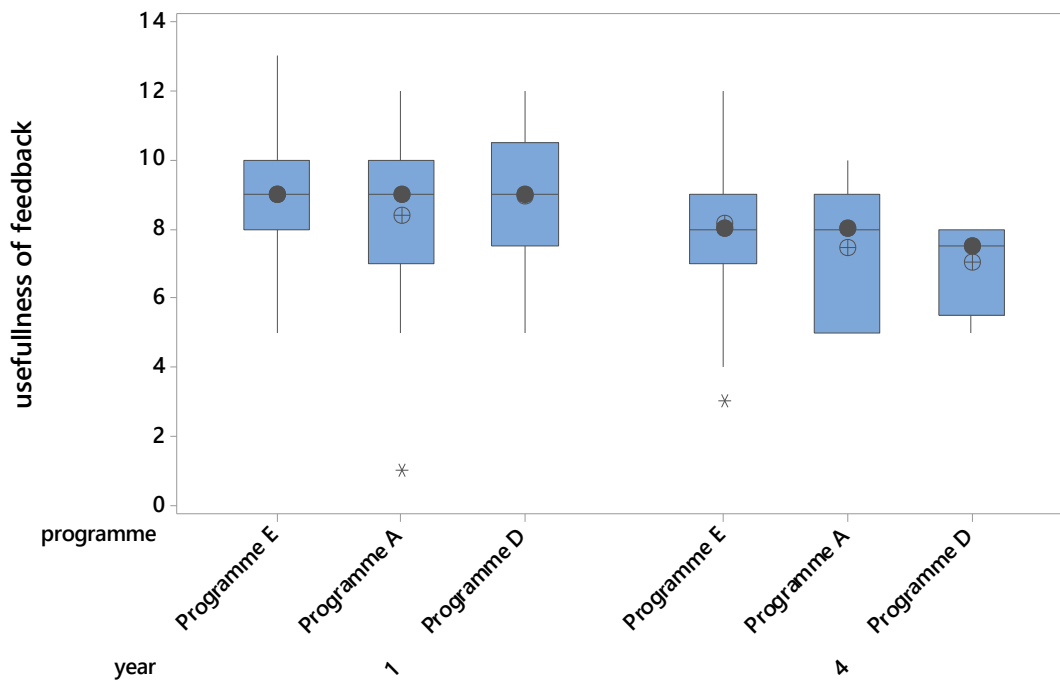
A full description of each of the participating programmes will be provided at the start of each subchapter.

### 4.3 DESCRIPTION OF SURVEY RESULTS

#### CHANGES TO STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FEEDBACK BETWEEN YEARS

There was a highly significant difference between mean scores for first- and fourth-year students in the perceptions of feedback factor (Table 4.4); this declined in all programmes (Programme E from 9.0 to 8.1, Programme A from 8.3 to 7.4 and Programme D from 9.0 to 7.0) between first and fourth year (Figure 5.1). Hence these results suggest that on average students' perceptions of the usefulness of feedback gets worse as they progress through the programme.

Figure 1 Median scores (with means shown as crosses) for perception of feedback in three programmes for first- and fourth-year students



*Table 4* Results of analysis of variance test on the students' perceptions of feedback factor with 'programme' and 'year' as fixed factors

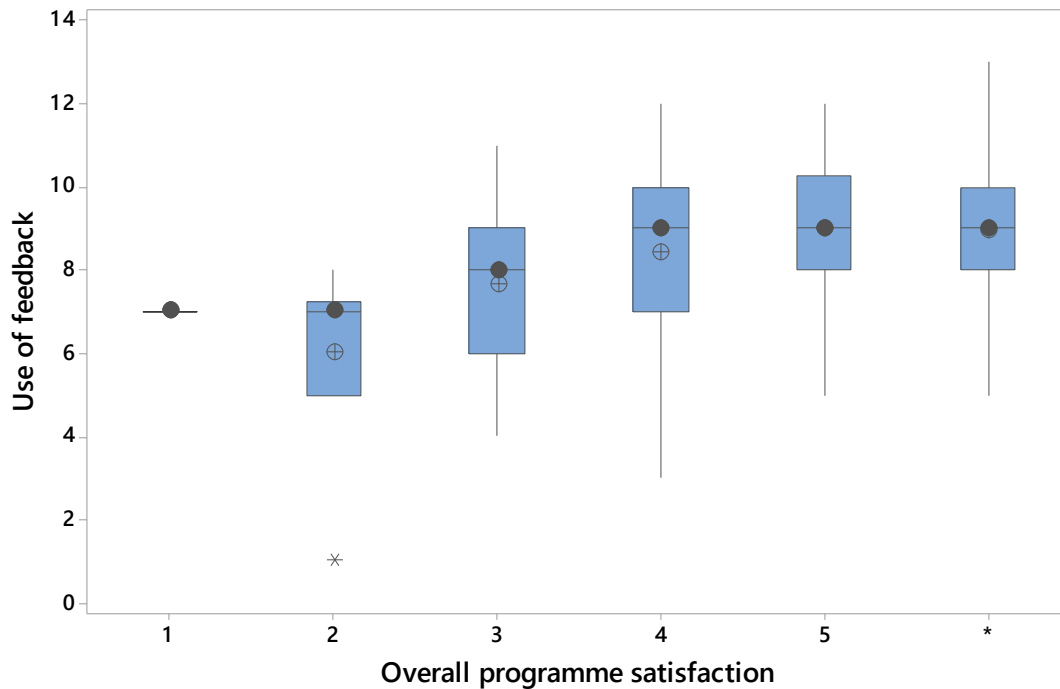
Source	DF	Adj SS	Adj MS	F-Value	P-Value
Programme	2	22.8	11.142	2.87	0.058
Year	1	38.82	38.818	9.99	0.002
Programme*year	2	3.39	1.997	0.51	0.599
Error	321	1246.97	3.885		
Total	326	1317.19			

Differences among programmes approached significance, with Programme D achieving the highest mean score (across years) of 8.7, and Programme A the lowest (at 8.2).

#### **DOES FEEDBACK HAVE AN EFFECT ON OVERALL SATISFACTION?**

There was a tendency for median use of feedback scores to increase with median satisfaction, although this trend levelled out after a satisfaction score of 4 (Figure 4.2)

Figure 2 Average student satisfaction against average use of feedback score across all programmes.



Differences among ‘satisfaction groups’ (that is, all those students who scored the same on overall satisfaction, on a scale from 1 to 5) were highly significant:

Table 5 ANOVA results for factor ‘overall satisfaction’ against ‘use of feedback’

Source	DF	Adj SS	ADj MS	F-Value	P-Value
Satisfaction	4	100.8	25.193	7.03	<0.001
Error	231	827.4	3.582		
Total	235	928.2			

Hence the quantitative data suggests that the more satisfied that students are in their programme of study, the more likely they are to use feedback.

*Table 6 ANOVA results for factor ‘overall satisfaction’ against ‘quality and quantity of feedback’*

Source	DF	Adj SS	Adj MS	F-Value	P-Value
Satisfaction	12	18.07	1.5055	2.60	0.03
Error	222	128.68	0.5797		
Total	234	146.75			

There is no relationship between the ‘quantity and quality of feedback’ factor and overall satisfaction, meaning that students do not equate their happiness in their programme of study with the amount of feedback they receive, or the perceived quality of that feedback.

#### 4.4 INSTITUTIONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES

While the research is focused on what can be done to encourage a greater feedback literacy in students, it is important to consider what role university policy has in shaping the assessment and feedback procedures that programmes, and even staff consider as part of their curriculum design. In 2015, Edinburgh Napier University was interested in what it would mean for student satisfaction if a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback was implemented at the university level. The institutional position was:

From a student’s perspective, assessment strategies that are based around modules will appear, at best, disorganised; even if each module is good there will

be no clear progression and rationale for the assessments experienced (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011). But things might be worse – or much worse - than this. Striving to improve a single module, without thinking how this links to the broader experience of students, might worsen student perceptions of a course as a whole; one or two outstanding modules could leave the rest looking bad. And failure to communicate and work together can even lead to perverse competition and an 'arms-race' between modules, with each module leader feeling required to escalate the demands in their own modules so that students pay them sufficient attention (Harland, Mclean, Wass, & Miller, 2015). (Edinburgh Napier University Assessment Handbook, 2016, p. 15)

It is this attitude held by the university that led to the funding of the current research. The university is invested in improving the student experience, and part of improving that experience was the acknowledgement that the assessment and feedback practices needed to be enhanced. The 2017 assessment handbook features a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback as one of the core pillars of curriculum design. There is also a shift to a greater importance of formative assessment and the importance of formative feedback. The handbook stresses the importance of the programme focused approach by writing:

Such an approach considers assessment and feedback holistically from the student point of view, seeking to ensure that the overall package a student experiences is manageable, coherent and fit-for-purpose (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Brown 2015). This is important because, from a student perspective, assessment design considered purely at a module level may appear as fragmented and piecemeal. Thinking about assessment and feedback holistically at the level of the programme (Jessop et al, 2014) has the potential to: 1. Enhance assessment and feedback practice, improving student engagement and student outcomes with a positive impact on retention, progression and satisfaction (including NSS scores relating to assessment and feedback). 2. Reduce staff and student workloads, recognising concerns about over-assessment in the sector. Typically, a programme level consideration provides opportunities at module level to reduce assessment loading but make it more effective for the students. 3. Encourage students' ongoing engagement with feedback, building on the principles of assessment for learning.

While the university guidance and formal support recognises the importance of programme coherence in curriculum design, the data generated in this study suggest that implementing such a change to programme structures may be more difficult than expected. Programme mapping, benchmarking and making connections between modules takes a considerable amount of time and relies on getting all programme staff together at the same time to be able to have these conversations. This time needs to be considered though so that these discussions can help lead to the feedback literacy of both staff and students.

#### 4.5 THE SUBCHAPTERS

The following five subchapters will present the data constructed from the participating programmes. The data will be presented in relation to the themes discussed at the start of this chapter. Those themes are:

- What is the structure of the course?
- Is there a programme-focused approach to feedback and assessment?
  - If not, is there a sustained approach to feedback in the programme?
- Staff Attitudes toward feedback
- What role do students have in the feedback process?

The following section will present the data constructed with each of the participating programmes. The programmes are presented as separate case studies in order to highlight the differences in programme structure and the differences between attitudes and approaches to assessment and feedback. Because of my belief that knowledge is co-constructed, the subchapters will include long quotes from the participants. This is to make sure that their words, as stated, generate the findings. The case studies will start with an introduction to the



programme. There will be a map of the programme structure, including programme demographics. This will be followed by a map of the assessment and feedback practices. The case study will then present the staff attitudes toward feedback, the student involvement in the feedback practice and conclude with a summary of the case study.

## 4A: PROGRAMME A

### 4A.1 PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION

Programme A is an undergraduate programme in the Business School. It is a four-year programme that allows for a September and January start date. Students are taught using a variety of methods including, lectures, tutorials, independent study and an optional work study placement in third year. The programme is open to a wide variety of students including international students. At the time of the study, Programme A had 345 students enrolled, with 35 in first year, 36 in 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 135 in 3<sup>rd</sup> year, and 139 in 4<sup>th</sup> year. The student demographic was mainly local, with 53% of the students being Scottish, 13% from the EU, and 34% being international. Student entry required the equivalent four Bs in Scottish Highers. The programme handbook states that in the programme:

This flexible course allows you to study business and specialise in the areas that you are interested in. Our course provides you with opportunities to discover how all organisations are managed, and develop and grow. You'll explore the internal structures and strategies which businesses adopt in response to the key external drivers for change which impact upon them.

In order to achieve the degree award, students must have taken modules to the value of 480 credit points. Figure 1 represents the typical experience of a single honours student in the programme with shading for compulsory modules, and credit weightings reflected.

**Figure 3 Overall degree structure and credit weightings**

Year			Module			
<b>Year 1</b>	20	20	20	20	20	20
<b>Year 2</b>	20	20	20	20	20	20
<b>Year 3</b>	20	20	20	WBL (60) 20	WBL (120) 20	20

<b>Year 4</b>	20	20	40	Dissertation	20	20

\*Shaded boxes represent compulsory modules for all students on the degree

#### 4A.2 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

Programme A is one of several degree programmes offered by the Business School. While there are compulsory modules in each year, the number of optional modules that students can complete to meet the requirements of the degree mean that there are around 100 different options for a path to completion of the degree. When asked why there was so many optional courses, and so many potential pathways to the degree, Christopher Cortez, the programme leader, stated that there were several reasons that they did not decrease the number of optional modules, chief among them:

...in the Business School we have the best NSS results in the university, so if it is not broken, why fix it?

I then asked Christopher if he thought that students in Programme A could make the connections between the modules that they were completing in the course of the programme. He mentioned:

You know, that connection is often tenuous, the programme was not exactly created on the basis of strict connections between modules, and the module leaders do not really talk to each other, but still, there should be some connections. Do they see how the module has helped them? I could tell you where I think these connections exist, but do I think they see them at all? I suspect that they don't. It is something that I would really like to tell the students. Not only to establish the connections, but to actually keep on reinforcing the message that you are in a programme of study and not just taking a collection of modules. To reinforce that those connections are there and that they are going from second to third or from first to second.

He went on to add:

different modules operate in different ways. Sometimes it will be a standalone, and sometimes it will not. It is something for us to look at as a team. We are always asked as

part of the module descriptors to link assessment to learning outcomes. I think what a majority of us we do is just put some ticks, I really shouldn't be saying these things when they are being recorded, but yeah, the fact of the matter is, it is really rough. I never really understood the learning outcomes anyway. Yes, my module has learning outcomes. Are they really described by six sentences? I don't think so. They are just really over simplistic. So, of all these quality processes where we need to link learning outcomes to assessments, it is just not a reality. So yeah, that's why we just start saying, it meets one learning outcome or another.

This attitude toward the learning outcomes from the programme leader are surprising given that it is often the programme leader who leads the discussions and meetings when building a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback. If staff do not believe in the connections that their intended learning outcomes have to their individual assessments, then it would remain highly unlikely that then staff could connect their modules to other modules in the programme using learning outcomes as part of the linking architecture.

Adding to this, as shown in Figure 1, there are compulsory modules for each year, but those modules do not necessarily connect in terms of the content taught. With the abundance of optional modules, it is also difficult for the programme to reference, or provide links between the compulsory and the optional modules to help students further their connections of their learning. This programme structure also does little to encourage staff working together and talking about where connections might be made. The lack of conversation around the module connections carries over to the students who then have to make the connections themselves.

#### 4A.3 ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES OF THE PROGRAMME

As part of the TESTA process, programmes receive an audit report that breakdowns the assessment and feedback procedures across the programme. What follows is the assessment breakdown for Programme A using the TESTA template for the audit report.

**Table 7 Breakdown of Assessments Programme A**

	Types of Assessment	Varieties	Summative	Formative	Exams	Return Times
	Exams; literature review; essays + abstract; critical analysis of research paper; annotated bibliography, quantitative data analysis; diagnostic/formative draft-redraft essay	4	32	0	24/32	21 days
	Short conceptual explanations; primary source-based research essays	3	52	0	28/52	21 days
	Research proposal; presentation; dissertation; policy brief	4	53	4	32/53	21 days
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>84/137</b>	<b>21 days</b>

#### **Summary categorisation of assessment**

Volume of assessment: 141

Volume of summative assessment: 137

Volume of formative only assessment: 4

Variety of assessment methods: 11

Percentage from examinations: 84%

Timeliness: 21 days

Programme A has a high volume of assessment, with each module having at least two summative assignments. The assessments in the programme are in the form of reports, research-based essays, group presentations and exams. The only formative assessment that happens in Programme A comes from the dissertation done at the end of the programme. Students have four deadlines for their dissertation that, while they are not graded, need to be completed so that students can progress with their research project. The lack of formative assessment means that students do not have a chance to receive formal feedback on their assignments before they are marked.

#### *4A.4 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK*

Staff in Programme A have a mixed view of feedback. A dominant theme in discussions with the staff in this programme was scepticism about the desire of students for genuinely developmental feedback combined with an acknowledgement that the culture of the programme may be complicit in generating this. They felt that the nature of some of the assessments meant that no feedback was necessary. As Jackson James noted:

I mean, what feedback can you give someone when you've got a 20-question objective test? You give them their paper back; they can see the ones they got wrong. I have put the question paper along with the suggestions up on Moodle, not sure there is an awful lot more. I guess you could go over the whole thing in class. My feeling with that is the students who have done well sittin' there for half an hour thinking, well I got all these right, I only got one wrong, I just need to know that one. I tend to just put it up on Moodle<sup>11</sup> and before any reassessment students are welcome to come to me at any stage and we can sit down and go through it.

---

<sup>11</sup> Moodle is the Virtual Learning Environment utilised by Edinburgh Napier University

Jackson went on to question whether students even wanted feedback and thought back to his own time at school. He mentioned:

Well, the focusing on the mark is unquestionably the most, because if they got a bad mark I'm not sure...as we said earlier, do they really look, are they really so dejected that they then, you know, just don't look at anything else because they've already got you, see I can't stand you Jackson. Um...I don't know what to say, does a good student get any feedback? Maybe they do, a good student. So I think the mark is a factor, I guess if they see within a module the feedback for one can be a source of help for another, so, you know,

if they struggled with some of the figure work here that they know they are going to replicate here you would like to think that would maybe motivate them to have a um, to have a look at the feedback. But Kim, Seriously, I go back, if I go back to my time in uni, did we get feedback? I bet in my day you would get your paper back and there would be 52% at the top and I bet there wouldn't be another thing. I'm not sure, I have no recollection of that, you know,

it was 40 years ago, well, 35 years ago, but I have no recollection of me ever getting any feedback

His colleague Jonathon Smith mentioned that he provides little to no feedback to students on his undergraduate courses.

We don't do it. The harsher you draw a line with that definition, we do not do that. I do not do that. Let's be more specific. And I was looking at actually the three modules that I teach on that I am the module leader for and actually out of the six assignments, out of the six assessments across three modules, four of them they get no feedback on other than the mark and some of that is because typically with exams I don't know how, we don't give feedback after an exam unless someone really asks for it and I do, when I am keeping my marks on a spreadsheet I'll put a comment and I'll have a couple of lines if anyone did come back to me

Jonathon also had a rather transactional view of education and how students engage with feedback.

we get people to think in very economic terms, almost in terms of return on investment, well one way you can increase your return on investment is investing less for the same return. And so in terms of engaging with feedback, I do wonder if you could have a camera Truman Show style and see what people were doing, how they were actually engaging with learning to start with, that would actually tell you everything about how they are going to engage with feedback.

Staff discussed the stacks of assignments that were never collected, which they think in large part are because they are ready for collection after an extended break from university (winter break or summer break) (Sage, 2014) so the students no longer feel like the feedback is going to be useful. This was a claim that was not substantiated by the students but did reinforce staffs' viewpoint that students did not want feedback.

#### *4A.5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS*

Students are not involved in the formal feedback practice at any point in the programme. For most of the programme, the students either do not get feedback (because they are being assessed through exams), or they are passive receivers of feedback from the lecturer or a marker (Deeley & Bovill, 2015; Huxham et al., 2015). Students were not part of meetings where the feedback procedures were discussed, and they were not involved in peer assessment or feedback at any point in the programme. There was space for them to discuss feedback while they were working on their dissertation, and that is only if they choose to engage with it. Some of the students felt like they were at the mercy of the module leaders when it came to their education. They mentioned that the exam formats and module expectations changed at a moment's notice, and that they were often left confused and frustrated at the lack of clarity.

Charles and Carrie sought me out after completing the feedback survey at the end of one of their lectures. They were growing increasingly frustrated with the way that some of the modules in



the programme handled assessment and feedback. They were part of a module that had just changed the assessment procedure from six potential exam questions to prepare for to 30 potential questions. As Charles mentioned,

They change the exams all the time, and now it went from knowing what we were going to be tested on to now having too many options to study for. What counts? What are we supposed to pay attention to? How do we know what to study?

Carrie shared that frustration.

We can't really do anything about them changing their mind halfway through the module. It was fine when we only had a few questions that we had to prepare for. Now there are over 30 options. We can't study for that, but we can't change it. The lecturer is the one in charge. No one asked us if we wanted something to change.

While students do not appear to have a formal role in the feedback process, they are also struggling with the feedback that they are receiving. When students were asked in the focus groups how they felt about the feedback they received and whether they used it, many of them discussed how difficult it was to engage with some of the feedback that they received. As Diane mentioned:

What is the point? It took almost a month to get the feedback from [the dissertation supervisor] and then when I finally did get it, it was just really harsh and not the least bit constructive. She told me the structure of the chapter was wrong, but that was it. I could not do anything to make the chapter better from what she told me. I had to figure it out on my own.... There is no dialogue to be had. When I wanted to meet and talk about the vague, and unhelpful feedback I got, she told me that I was overreacting and needed to calm down. My entire mark was based on this assignment, I think I should be concerned if I don't understand what is said to me. It would be nice if I could have had a chat with the lecturer at some point. I missed out on a module because I was a spring start, and then got marked down for things I had never learned, and no one bothered to make sure that I understood.

Carrie also struggled with the feedback that she received.

I have a hard time learning from feedback when it is vague and really is just negative and unhelpful. How am I going to use it when it is just mean? I cry just sending an email asking for clarification, so there is no way I would want to have that chat face-to-face

Brook also discussed what kept her from engaging with her feedback.

I have to look at the feedback because if I got something wrong it is because I never learned it like they expected me to. I don't always understand what they are telling me to do, so sometimes even when I look at the feedback, I am not sure I know what I am supposed to I followed the module handbook, and then got feedback that I had structured the paper wrong, and when I said I got it from the handbook, she told me that I was wrong. The feedback just made me feel like I was stupid.

There were some other reasons that students seem like they are not as actively engaged with their feedback. A couple of the students mentioned that they do not open a dialogue with staff about their feedback if they are comfortable with what they have received.

I don't go and ask about my feedback if I understood it. There really is no reason to talk about it if it makes sense. That would just be a waste of time for everyone.

Charles mentioned that he did not want to talk to staff about the feedback if the mark on the assignment was bad. He did not want to be reminded of a poor mark. He also mentioned that he wanted to be the one to figure out his feedback.

I have emailed once or twice and got clarification, but I like to just figure it out on my own. I don't want to talk about it, especially if it is bad.

#### *4A.6 CONCLUSION*

Programme A is one of a suite of programmes in the Business School. They do not follow a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback, and do not have a sustained approach to feedback. The design of the programme, with so many optional courses available to students, makes it difficult to realign it in a programme focused approach. The structure of the

programme also makes creating a sustained approach to feedback difficult because the optional courses are not all part of the Business School.

The programme structure is not the only barrier to the students' feedback literacy. Staff on the programme do not feel that students want, or even need feedback. Staff in the programme have a transactional view of the degree process, holding the belief that since many students do not collect their essays or assignments where feedback has been provided. The students do not collect their feedback because they do not feel that the staff care about providing it. Students are not involved in the feedback process, and the structure of the assessments means that they rarely receive it.

## 4B PROGRAMME B

### *4B.1 PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION*

Programme B is an undergraduate programme in the School of Applied Sciences. It is a four-year programme with options for a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science. Both of the degrees are accredited by an outside accrediting body. At the time of this study, Programme B had 140 students, with 33 students in the first year, 52 in 2nd year, 30 in 3rd year, and 25 in 4th year. The student demographic is mostly local with 76% of the cohort comprised of Scottish students, 10% from the EU, and 14% international. According to the programme handbook, students will:

...develop a range of practical, intellectual, research and transferable skills, including psychological and social research methods, group working, communication, critical thinking and problem solving. You'll also gain the skills to source, use and interpret information, design experiments and use related software. You'll learn by a variety of teaching methods including lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions and through independent study. Students can apply to take part in the Getting Inside Programme, a Napier University programme that allows students to shadow professionals over a five-day period, possibly contributing to an industry-based project.

Programme lead Brandon Davis discussed the type of students that he hoped to recruit to Programme B. He stated:

Really engaged and questioning. I always think that if I can get a student who is really critical, and they are always, like when they see anything on television like a report or a survey, that they go, 'oh that's nonsense!' or 'what was their sample size?' those sorts of things, if they can do that and not take anything for granted, that is how I know we've done our job. They need quite a range of skills for [this programme], often one of the things that is often a surprise for the students is the statistics and that whole subject area, most students are not aware of it when they come in. We so have sort of a requirement that students have some sort of maths, a higher form of maths than most programmes do, and we have some modules that are across programmes and we see a big big difference. [Subject area] students are much more confident and much more able in that respect. They have to be literate and numerate. We hope they come in with just a bit of

confidence more than anything, you know, just not feeling scared about things. I think also an open mindedness.

Brandon’s comment on the type of student that they hope to attract to the programme is important, because Programme B is not interested in all students ticking boxes to get the degree. They are not interested in developing attributes that are not only important in the field, but are important for becoming critical thinkers and critical beings in the world. The degree programme is more than just a diploma (Archer and Chetty 2013; Walker and Fongwa 2017).

**Figure 4 Overall degree structure and credit weighting Programme B**

Year			Module			
Year 1	20	20	20	20	20	20
Year 2	20	20	20	20	20	20
Year 3	20	20	20	20	20	20
Year 4	20	20	40	Honours Project	20	20

\*Shaded boxes indicate mandatory modules

#### 4B.2 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

Programme B had restructured the programme a few years before I interviewed them. Brandon mentioned that the changes were not always made at the programme level, but they had tried to think about the programme as a whole when they were considering what the new programme structure would be. He said,

I mean, it is funny the way [Programme B], the way the programme has gone. Back a few years ago we changed from 15 credit modules to 20 credit modules. So we used to have a sort of really good structure of modules, it was four modules a trimester, and then we had to move to three, so we had a chance to look across the programme and say, ‘right, well, we used to have a report in that module, but that module is gone, so we will put a report in here and here’ and it was great. Then as it moved on through the years, individual module leaders would make a tweak here and a tweak there and then you come now and you are like, right, so all the modules in year 2, tri 1 have multiple choice tests, and there

should be some reports done, but we need to have some sort of....I think it is a good time to look at things because it has been very much the change is dictated by the module leader, and sometimes the change is dictated by what we are doing overseas.

One student did comment on the structure of the programme though, and for this student, there were no connections to be made between the modules.

The structure of the different modules were completely different in most aspects meaning not only did you have to work on the coursework and understanding what you are learning but you have to do it a different way for each class, this made the whole of first and second year feel disjointed- as though each class had nothing to do with another. I was also disappointed when it came to the optional modules, the lack of talk among the different studies meant that I was forced to take a module that I have no interest in and will be of no use for my future studies or career. However, a few lecturers and PhD students were very helpful and focused on our understanding of given subjects instead of "here are the facts- memorise them".

Other students mentioned that the assessment structure that is mostly exam based made it hard for students to really engage with feedback. As they noted:

'Personally, I find exams to be not very productive and at times pointless because of the stuff that needs memorized. Especially in a course like [Programme B] I'd rather spend the time exploring different things or deepening other areas in interest so I could learn better about myself and others.'

'I feel that some of the deadlines for the assessments were too near exam time. In one module, I had weeks of no assessment and then deadlines fell 1 week/2 weeks before the exam which isn't helpful as I need to complete coursework before I can make a start on revision. It would be helpful if all assessment hand ins were at least 2/3 weeks before an exam. I also feel that the exam tests more of what I can cram into an essay in a short space of time rather than having more time to write a fully structured essay. I feel that because the exams are quite short with regards to timing, it's not really a true representation of my knowledge.'

'Faster feedback (especially in 3rd and 4th year) would be helpful. Feedback from exams would also be useful.'

#### 4B.3 ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES OF THE PROGRAMME

As with Programme A, Programme B went through the audit process. The following table is the map of the assessments across the four-year programme.

**Table 8 Breakdown of assessments Programme B**

	Types of Assessments	Varieties	Summative	Formative	Exam	Return Times
	Exams; literature review; essays + abstract; critical analysis of research paper; annotated bibliography; quantitative data analysis; diagnostic/formative draft-redraft essay.	3	32	0	17/32	21 days
	Short conceptual explanations; primary source-based research essays	4	10	0	0/10	21 days
	Research proposal; presentation; dissertation; policy brief	2	4	2	4/4	21 days
<b>Totals</b>			<b>46</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>21/46</b>	<b>21</b>

#### Summary categorization of assessment

Volume of assessment: 48

Volume of summative assessment: 46

Volume of formative only assessment: 2

Variety of assessment methods: 9

Percentage from examinations: 27% (13/48)

Timeliness: 21 days

The formative assessment for this programme comes during the final project. Students must submit drafts of their proposals before they can move onto the next stage of the project. Many of their assessments are essay and report based, although the structure for the essays and the reports are not always structured the same across the programme.

#### *4B.4 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK*

The staff in Programme B were very interested in feedback, and how students responded to the feedback that they received in the programme. They were aware of the university project and the university's growing investment in formative assessment and had some concerns about what it would mean for the programme when they had to have mandatory formative assessment tasks in their modules. Michelle Sanders echoed the concern. Her concern was supported by conversations that she had with students invited to participate in the yearly staff away day for the programme.

We did ask this of the students that came along to our away day yesterday, How would you feel, you know, if you still did those presentations, but you didn't get any credit for them? And they said, well, we wouldn't do them. But what if it was a student led tutorial and you had to come and present? Well, we would go and present, but we probably wouldn't go to the other tutorials. So I am really wary of setting them things to do that don't have marks attached because I don't think they will do them. And I know there is an argument for, well if they want to learn and they can see the value in it then they'll do it, but at the same time, if I tie a notional couple of percent to it, it means they do do it and then....I guess I am scared of what if I turn feedback into formative and they don't do it and then their exam grades get worse because we missed....I think it was the KPI for my third year module last year, too many people failed. And this year it is better, and I don't know if that was because of more interesting essay questions, it wasn't based on lecture material, or whether it was just a better cohort or anything, but I don't want their grades to get any worse. You are always quite disappointed with what you get in exams because they always just trot out the lectures and I'm always trying to get to ways that they can tell me new things.



Brandon shared Michelle's worries:

We were amazed, because we said we would make it marked and they all did it. I think it is sort of that element of, 'well if you don't do it, then what?' and students will do it, and if nothing happens then, then what's the point of doing it? But I think if they can see, well if I do this and it then means I can do that later, then that makes a difference. I think, some will use it as sort of a lead in. The TESTA definition of Formative Assessment is anything that provides feedback, but in my mind, it is more of an assessment that they get proper feedback on and there is no grade attached, but there has to be some sort of consequence for not doing it. Students have to engage with it. I think what's happened in this module with the three essays is that the students haven't necessarily engaged with it. So not every student submitted the essays. Some students have submitted essays, but what they've done is just submit essays from other modules, so it looks like they have submitted something, so the module leader will see, well it looks like they submitted something and never actually gone.

It was interesting to hear Brandon speak about the TESTA definition of formative assessment because the programme only had two pieces of work that could be classified as formative according to the definition. The definition was also not about any piece of work that received feedback, but focused on assessments that do not have a mark associated with it.

He then went on to say,

I think some of the module descriptors will say there is formative assessment in tutorials, but it is not what I think is formative assessment. I think, you know, speaking to a lecturer about you know, 'How do I approach the essay question?' is not really formative assessment. I think a lot of people across the school fudge it and call it formative assessment. So I think there is, one of our modules this year has just changed assessment strategy, and it is to include more formative assessments. Students submit three sort of draft essays, and the sole assessment is the exam. That has caused a few issues. I think it is because students are not used to this idea of having to do work and not get a grade, but also because it was because the lecturer did not give any feedback, it was peer assessed.

When asked though about providing feedback, and about what the formative feedback should look like, both Brandon and Michelle were very interested in providing the best feedback

possible for the students and the general programme attitude was that feedback is important and should be provided in a way that will be beneficial for students. As Michelle stated:

It takes a long time and I probably write more than I need to, but I, in the past I have pulled students up on references, and they have said, why are you pulling me up on this, I've never been pulled up on this before. And you can't comment on everything, but I can see something is wrong, I should flag it so they know, so that when someone flags it in the future they don't say, well, she never told me about it...I try and give them as much as I possibly can and I try to always include in my feedback, you know, if your referencing is wrong, here is a link to the referencing system that we use, I've highlighted where in your reference list is wrong, go to this resource, check it, if you are having struggle, if you are having trouble constructing an argument, contact academic skills development, they can help you. So try and direct them to places.

She went on to mention what she felt possibly kept students from using the feedback for learning.

I'm always thinking about student feedback because I seem to be doing it all the time, I think that quite often students don't really know what they need so when they ask for things, yeah you might not be able to do that for them under the regulations, but sometimes they want particular assessments but it is not the best way of meeting the learning outcomes or they want you to say certain things in their feedback that are not actually going to help them. I do think we could probably work harder at times at telling them what they have done well. I always try and give them something positive, but then I've had comments from students whose work has been marked by other people and they've said, well there wasn't anything that said what I had done well and it was an external person, like a zero hours<sup>2</sup>, so I know what I did wrong for this essay, but I don't really know what I did right. I don't really know what to continue doing. So I think probably I would work on doing that more and clarity, legibility. So I mean I like to type, I like to use Grademark<sup>3</sup> because it means I am not carrying around loads of paper, but I think if they've got everything there, and we share banks of comments between staff as well, so within the module team, we have the [name of module] rubric, and I share my comments with the other markers so we all use the same language, so they should see consistency across different markers. But I think students are never happy with it. They are never happy with their feedback, and obviously just giving more of what we give them doesn't help because I do that year on year on

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<sup>2</sup> A zero-hour contract is a type of contract between an employer and a worker, where the employer is not obliged to provide any minimum working hours, while the worker is not obliged to accept any work offered

<sup>3</sup> GradeMark is a feature of Turnitin (a plagiarism protection tool) that allows an instructor to make comments on student papers,

year and they don't get happier. I think fundamentally they want something that we are genuinely not giving, but I don't know exactly what that is.

In contrast to Programme A, the staff in Programme B are invested in helping the students and want them to have a voice and feel like they are being supported in the feedback process. They recognise that students are not happy with the feedback, and they would like to do something to change that, but there is still the problem of students not being feedback literate, and not being able to voice what they want or need from the feedback. The attitude of the staff toward the students, and to the feedback that they provide to the students, shows a commitment to helping students develop the skills they need to succeed when they graduate rather than just tick boxes to earn a degree.

Michelle ended our interview with a statement that seemed to fit with the general feeling on campus when it came to formative assessment:

So, I would be very interested to see what comes out of your report, I can see the value in formative assessments, but I think that it's risky when we are not giving them any credit, but I guess we will see.

#### *4B.5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS*

During his conversation with me, Brandon also noted that he did not find the students particularly interested in the feedback. If students scheduled a meeting with staff, the discussion was not about the feedback they received on the assignment but rather focused on the mark.

As he mentioned

I mean we sometimes get, very rarely actually, we get students who want to chat about their grades. I think that one of my colleagues said that she had a first year asking for more detail about why he got the mark that he did, but the students, I think, to be honest,

that all they care about is the mark. They see it as 'that's it, done.' And they don't really think about using the feedback.

While staff feel that students only care about the mark, they are willing to work with the students to help adapt, change, or enhance the current assessment and feedback practices to help students engage with the feedback as a learning tool. Staff invited students to take part in their programme away day to provide the student perspective on the assessment and feedback procedures in the modules. It is hard to gauge the student engagement with the feedback process though due to the low response rate from the surveys and the lack of response for the focus groups. The comments on the surveys returned said that every module was different, but overall the feedback was okay.

There is not a sustained approach to feedback at the programme level, but at the module level, staff try to make sure that everyone who marks the assignments on a module does so in a similar manner. They make use of the comment banks in Turnitin and try to encourage all markers to utilise the same comments to help students get the same quality of feedback.

Students did comment at the end of the survey that there was some consistency that they wanted from their feedback. As one student wrote:

All lecturers should make use of the electronic feedback facility on Turnitin, it's a much more efficient system than queueing for paper copies or trying to arrange times to collect it.

While this last quote is about process rather than content, it is important to note given that Programme A stated that many of the students failed to return to collect their feedback, and the

students in Programme B showed a lack of interest in discussing their feedback. The response rate for the survey was 11 students, with none of the students participating in focus groups or interviews. The students in Programme B might be more engaged with the feedback if it is easier for them to access it.

#### *4B.6 CONCLUSION*

Programme B is a programme based in the School of Applied Sciences. While they do not employ a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback, they do have modules that build on each other, and making the connections between the modules is a lot easier than that of other participating programmes. Staff who run large modules that have multiple people marking assignments do take care to have a comment bank that is shared among the markers so that students are getting as consistent of feedback as possible on their assignments. They are not opposed to a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback, and actually welcomed the notion that they could create a set of standards for the programme in terms of essay or report structures so that there is no confusion between assignments.

In contrast to Programme A, the attitude of the staff was that feedback is important, and that they were more than willing to adjust or enhance their feedback practices based on what the students want. They invite students to their away days and staff meetings to get their input on policy and practice. Staff take the feedback from students seriously and are interested in building the student experience. While the students in Programme B have expressed that something is missing from the feedback they are receiving, they cannot identify what is missing. There is also a perceived lack of interest from the students about having conversations and really trying to figure out what that missing component is. Programme B had the lowest response rate

from students, with only 11 responding to the survey, and no students participating in interviews or focus groups.

## 4C PROGRAMME C

### *4C.1 PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION*

Programme C is a programme in the School of Arts & Creative Industry. It is a four year-fulltime programme open to a wide variety of students, including international students. At the time of the study, they had 91 students, with 24 students in Year 1, 27 students in Year 2, 19 students in Year 3 and 21 students in Year 4. According to the programme handbook:

Academic modules are taught through a combination of formal and active lectures, seminars, group and individual tutorials, while practical modules combine these methods with workshops, demonstrations, exercises, presentations and supervised sessions. Academic and practical modules may include visits to places of interest, and a regular visiting lecture programme will expose you to a wide-range of approaches and practices... There is also an element of individual and group-based self-directed study and research together with appropriate tutor support.

Students are assessed on the submission of creative practical work, supporting documentation and essay assignments. These outcomes are measured against students' original intentions, learning contracts, project briefs, self-assessment and supporting research material. Assessment may also be based on the submission of other documentation such as technical and creative workbooks, workshop journals, production and project dossiers and case studies. The personal development and engagement of students is also assessed through technical exercises, oral presentations and participation in and group critiques.

### *4C.2 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE*

Due to the creative nature of the programme, many of the modules link to, and build on the skills of one another, although they are not linked through a programme-focused approach. The programme was willing to shift their perspective but were worried about having to try for a one-sized-fits-all feedback that they felt came with a programme-focused approach to feedback. As Kelly mentioned:

We do a crit, I'm just thinking about the courses we do a crit, and we tell them from day one, you know, from their first crit that this is, that this is feedback. Um, but we do a crit, we ask them to do a self-reflective piece, a reflective self-assessment piece, all after the crit. They hand that in after the crit...they don't hand it in with it. So the self-reflection should not just take account of their process but actually the feedback in essence, although we don't emphasize that enough about. It's maybe we need to think about that more holistically.

Matthew picked up on the point when he said:

Yeah we could, and across the 6 times 4, the 24 plus modules, well 22 plus modules with options out of the way, the feedback is varied. There is consistency of styles across the years, but within the years there are a variation because the students have to understand that feedback comes in different guises. I would actually argue, and I would probably be shot down for it, but I think there should be occasionally when you do modules where the feedback is a grade mark full stop.

#### *4C.3 ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES OF THE PROGRAMME*

Programme C felt that they had a lot of formative feedback built into their programme. In terms of assessment though, everything that students are asked to complete has a mark attached to it.

Programme lead, Matthew Dean had this to say about the lack of formative assessment:

I think the first thing is, there is a kind of historical context to it. The practice based has traditionally always been the testosterone charged critique at the end where everyone is challenged about their position and ideally all the students do it, which doesn't always work, and the danger is that it becomes the staff's prerequisite of control and power, so that's one of the problems. We have tried to address that by doing a variety of things. We have shifted to work-in-progress in certain models and we also started to call them pin-ups rather than critiques so there is a more relaxed notion of it. The danger in that is that I think sometimes the students miss the point that it is a critical critique and I am not sure whether that is because we have changed the title or we have changed the direction slightly of how we do it. We have altered some of the assessments in third year in which, which is to mimic what happens in the real world to a certain extent.



Staff in Programme C are concerned about creating meaningful assessments for the students. They want them to leave the programme with the sense of what it will be like to work in the field, and the types of jobs and experiences they will have (Vu & Dall'alba, 2014). This is important for the students in this programme who are going to enter a competitive workforce that comes with a lot of critique.

We have submission of practice-based work which may or may not go on a wall and may or may not be seen by the cohort. Now some of the students hate that because they want to see how others on the assignment did, and for us, it causes them rethink how they present it without being able to defend it. So they have to have correct titling, have to have, and that in a sense...if you submit for a commission, or you submit for a potential award, all of your information goes out of your hands and you have no control, so we try to get them to understand what the resolution of that is, and that resolution comes as a pin up in a kind of formal critique situation, but there are other strategies. Those strategies are physical, as in, portfolio boxes, can be USB, we have occasionally used online as well. Online has different problems, scale in terms of the storage, also if the intention of the work is to be seen on a larger scale, we tend to see them on small computer, so you never get that in that context, the feedback in terms of ongoing, we do group tutorials generally, and group seminars to discuss the topic, It is ongoing formative in that sense. So it is getting them to understand, and how important that is. I mean, I've just gone through 2 and half weeks with one module where they have drop in tutorials and no students came and I think that is why the partially differing forms of how things are assessed and how, going back to feedback, we have worked hard over the years to increase, to why we have increased the feedback, unless it is feedback in relation to assessment, that's peer assessment, the ongoing submission via Dropbox, etc, I think there is this major issue of, this major issue of how most of us simply gage, and at what point we try and locate how these forms, in the beginning, but make them more autonomous towards the end.

The staff in Programme C are focused on the student learning journey and what that entails from day one to graduation. They understand the importance of students building their skills slowly and how the assessment and feedback practice can support that learning. While they were not following a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback, they modelled

programme focused attributes, and allowing students to make the connections and use the assessments and feedback to grow and develop. They are interested in students becoming feedback literate because the feedback plays such a vital role in the overall learning on the programme.

**Table 9 Volume of assessment Programme C**

	<b>Volume of Assessment</b>	<b>Volume of Summative Assessment</b>	<b>Volume of Formative Assessment</b>	<b>Variety of Assessment Methods</b>	<b>Percentage from Examination</b>
<b>Programme C</b>	82	82	0	13	0.01%

#### *4C.4 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK*

Some of the staff in Programme C felt that the feedback was more a reflection of the member of staff, rather than the students' work, and that can really influence the way that feedback is presented. As the programme leader for Programme C mentioned, with the pressure of NSS scores, module evaluations and the link to 'success', there is the possibility that the performative aspect of feedback and providing feedback that students will like so that they fill out the evaluations in a positive way clouds the actual feedback for learning. This current, metrics driven culture in higher education and perverse external drivers encourage little more than superficial and performative discussions (Stein et al., 2004). This means that staff are bound to convention, and to the artificial environment of the current university system (Stein et al., 2004). It is too hard to make changes to feedback, or to structure a classroom environment that might take students out of their comfort zone when a bad evaluation could potentially damage a career.

Want results//feedback asap after hand-ins, not months later. Not organized or structured enough, does not help trying to balance and organize assignments and learning. Need more structure! Consistency assessment material and feedback get back to late (2<sup>nd</sup> year student Programme C)

The students in Programme C were quick to mention that the turnaround time for feedback was too slow. Many felt that the modules were disorganized and that it was unfair for students to be expected to turn in assignments at a set time and day when staff do not follow the set time and day for returns. Students felt that there was a lack of consideration for them by staff when this happens. They felt if they adhered to the deadlines for the assignment, then staff should as well.

Consistently, assessment material and feedback get given back too late (2<sup>nd</sup> year student Programme C).

Staff were very aware of how students felt about the timeliness of feedback and expressed concern about the effects of grades in influencing student perception of feedback. As Kelly stated:

What happens with our students is that they see the 14 days [the suggested turnaround time for feedback on coursework in the university is 21 days] and they look upon feedback as that piece of paper they get at the end as opposed to the fact that they have had feedback immediately because their hand in will often be the crit. When you do um, and that becomes a process, so as much as we try and get across to them this is your actual feedback, they look upon it as something later on and even, I've even tried it on the more historical critical side, you know, they do presentations and I give them immediate feedback on it, and the feedback is again against the learning outcomes and they are still, well what's, where is my feedback? It is where's my grade? It is actually going to be a difficult thing in terms of formative when we are not grading...so a bit about you teaching the students.

The staff also articulated a growing worry that in terms of student satisfaction, their provision of feedback was scrutinized and judged by an array of instruments and metrics and that this perceived pressure influenced how feedback was given and received. As Kelly mentioned:

There is a kind of onus that feedback is becoming a measure of us rather than information for the student. I think we have to be, in fact interesting course evals about the new student survey being done that is drafted and has been going out, the middle section of which is about staff, but the heading of it is staff member and gets insert name. So you have two things starting to happen, a sense of objectivity, subjectivity getting confused by 'I don't like him so I am going to give him a bad mark' or 'I don't like her, or she's lovely', and there are people who are lovely who are crap teachers, but they empathize beautifully and the students think they are good when actually they are learning nothing. So that's an issue in that context, it is also, it is getting ready for the TEF rather than the REF because it is about the American model, did you get enough ticks from the students to keep your job. But I think we have to be very careful what we ask for from that kind of analysis of the feedback, but also of what students understand of the feedback.

Matthew mentioned that the feedback and the response to feedback was about balance, and about the people who were providing the feedback.

But which is, in performative ways quite interesting. It is making them think, what am I doing with this person, but the danger then is that the feedback is only that person's voice. So I think, like all things it is a balance. The problem is that the pendulum swings depending on who is in charge, who decides, actually I like written material, or I like grid box mechanisms for things.

Matthew did mention that the programme had tried to make changes to the feedback that they provide students.

The feedback on one level was appalling. You literally had one line, very good work, or, this is appalling. And, I have seen that, I know the person who did it, he's gone, but, so, the module would happen, but they wouldn't take it forward into the other modules, which, with the new programme, when we were finally allowed to, realign, well that's another story, when we realigned, what we tried to do was make sure that the feedback informed the next module and across the modules. So, in restructuring it, we are trying

to stop the students from seeing the modules as silos. Now, we tend not to, (Name of a lecturer) does I think, but none of us else do, we don't take the learning outcomes and break them down into five grids, four grids and then give the feedback per learning outcome and there is an argument that you should do that, but the danger is, if you are working in creative avenues, the students can interpret the brief, actually can touch on all the learning outcomes, but really it is the second one that makes it work. And do you say, okay, you get 80 for this, but by the way, the other three are really rubbish so we are going to give you bad marks and you are going to drop down to a C and the thing is, you don't do that. We include, this is why the feedback has to be quite intense, you talk about the other three areas in the weaknesses, so this research is superficial, but it is clear that you are looking at work and not just annotating and articulating because it is evidenced in your final project submission. So you are saying to them, get your act together, but you are not saying you are punished because you've done a great piece of work, but I am not going to take the rug out from under you, now, interestingly enough, our external assessor has just given us an external assessment, you know, next year is going to be a disaster because it was so good. His one criticism for our excellent feedback is we give too much.

Staff on Programme C were interested what students were actually doing with the feedback they received, and whether or not they always recognised the feedback that they received as actual feedback. Matthew mentioned a problem that he thinks exists not just in Programme C, but in the general expectation of the university when it comes to learning.

I think the problem we have...I don't know if it is a problem, or if it is me thinking it's a problem, Kelly, you can shoot me down on this one, but, I think one of the problems is inherently in institutions, there is a hidden form of banking education. I've given it now give it back to me. It's easier to mark, and that comes up when you get the rubrics on Turnitin....fixed answers, find the word and fix it and you know, that kind of stuff. But in the first year, and partial, partially of the second year we do need to have a form of banking education because they need to have set skills to release their creativity. Because without those skills their creativity will always be stymied by the very thing they need to know how to do.

Programme C did strive to have a consistent structure for providing feedback. They kept the general feedback practices the same for each year, but Matthew acknowledged that within the

different modules, there was still the potential for a variety of approaches to feedback. Programme C was interested though to know if the ways in which students engaged with the feedback would change if the programme thought not only about adopting a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback, but tried to provide the feedback in a way that would mirror the feedback that students would get if they pursued a job in the field. Matthew was quick to mention a potential problem to providing feedback in this manner. He said:

99% of the population out there in the real world who our graduates go to, do not work in that way with grid boxes and things, it is about articulation, bullet point responses, and reflective understanding of where they are. Now, if you were to say, let's run a module where all students have to do which about self-analysis and self-reflection, I would say yes to that, but you would have a real problem because students would suddenly realize that they have problems, which the university does not want.

#### *4C.5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS*

The students in Programme C did not seem to have an active role in the feedback practice. Students had made it clear that they were focused on the timeliness of the feedback but did not discuss the role they played in how the feedback was delivered, or what forms it was delivered.

But in some respects that notion of self-reflection, and I've seen it introduced in various places where they try and do what they call TRIAD, so you have student, crit student, and someone observing telling them what...that's very dangerous because you are mock counselling and mock, and you are almost giving someone power who shouldn't have that power.

The potential for self-reflection, and to practice crits with fellow students was just about the only exposure that students had to being involved in the feedback practice, but given what staff felt was important for the students, there is room for them to have a more active role in the process.

#### *4C.6 CONCLUSION*

Programme C is a programme in the school of Arts & Creative Industry. The creative nature of the programme means that the modules are designed to help the students develop and hone their skills as they move through the programme. While not expressly programme focused, they do see the value in a cohesive programme. Each year of the programme tries to be consistent in the way that feedback is provided, but the response rate for returning the feedback to students is slow. The staff are aware of the issue with feedback, but the general attitude seems to be that the feedback takes time and it is not something that they can be easily rectified.

Staff are interested in helping students build the skills that will help them succeed in the marketplace. They have designed meaningful assessment and try to provide feedback in a similar style that the students will see outside of the classroom. They feel hindered by the university structure because the students in this programme will not be given feedback in grids and tick box fashion that aligns with university rubrics and feedback sheets.

Students do not have a role in the structure of the feedback practices, but they do participate in the feedback process during the modules. For them, the slow return of the feedback is more important to them the actual content of the feedback. Many of them feel they cannot engage with the feedback when it is returned months after the assessment has been completed.

## 4D PROGRAMME D

### 4D.1 PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION

Programme D is an undergraduate programme in the School of Arts & Creative Industries. This is a full-time course studied over four years. The course is supported by state-of-the-art facilities and a range of other industry-relevant software. The student learning experience is supported by lectures, tutorials, one-to-one and group lessons. 50% coursework/50% practical exams in Years 1-3, with assessment based on chosen area of study and independent strengths in Year 4. At the time of the study, there were 34 students in Year 1, 26 students in Year 2, 30 students in Year 3, and 20 students in Year Four. According to the programme handbook:

Our programme is designed for applicants with an interest and experience in composition and performance who wish to develop a breadth of skills that will allow them to pursue a portfolio career in the Industries. Career destinations include: performance, composition, production and engineering, teaching, management and promotions, therapy, and community projects. You'll also extend your critical, entrepreneurial, and creative abilities throughout this wide-ranging degree.

**Table 10 Overall degree structure and credit weightings Programme D**

Year			Module			
Year 1	20	20	20	20	20	20
Year 2	20	20	20	20	20	20
Year 3	20	20	20	20	20	20
Year 4	20	20	40	Honours Project	20	20

### 4D.2 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

Programme D were already utilizing a programme focus approach to feedback and assessment.

The programme had been realigned before they agreed to participate in this study and they were



interested to learn whether the students were responding to the changes. Their programme was realigned with a clear progression that would allow students to build on their skills from year to year, module to module. The students had no problem making the module connections:

Staff co-ordinate effectively and often give relevant context to what is being taught. They also apply personal experiences and processes, which improves the learners' connections and involvement with the learning process. (2<sup>nd</sup> year student)

Overall, the programme has been outstanding, the 1 on 1 lessons are hugely motivating, the theory classes are very insightful and teach us theory that we are encouraged to apply and therefore pushes us to understand it even more. The session skills modules however felt a bit unorganised in the sense that it wasn't always clear what the assessments were and how we were being assessed. The [coursework for a particular module] has definitely been one of the highlights of this whole programme. (2<sup>nd</sup> year student)

#### 4D.3 ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES OF THE PROGRAMME

**Table 11 Breakdown of assessments Programme D**

	Types of Assessments	Varieties	Summative	Formative	Exam	Return Times
	Exams; literature review; essays + abstract; critical analysis of research paper; annotated bibliography; quantitative data analysis; diagnostic/formative draft-redraft essay.	1	6	0	6	21 days
	Short conceptual explanations; primary source-based research essays, portfolios	3	42	20		21 days

	Research proposal; presentation; dissertation; policy brief	4	38	0	0	21 days
	Performance, presentations, practical	3	44	0		
<b>Totals</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>21</b>

The staff had a different approach to feedback than the other programmes that took part in the research. They viewed feedback as another component of teaching and tried to make sure that it was incorporated into all the aspects of the module. The staff on this programme were strong proponents of formative feedback, and all modules had a variety of opportunities for formative feedback. Programme D provided feedback in a variety of forms including written comments, audio and video feedback, and face-to-face meetings with students. The variety of formats was meant to help students better understand the feedback provided.

As Bradley Younger stated:

I think the feedback needs to let students understand where there are problems in their work, but it also needs to say if you had done this, this would have been better and these are other things you might consider to do in the future to improve your work. So it probably needs to have three stages, I know for certain with Confident futures they talk to students very much about two stages, you know, what are the things that need developed, what are the things you could have done better, you know, or what are the things you could have done better, what are the things you could improve.

As with Programme C, this is a creative based programme, and the way the modules are structured make it very easy for the students to make connections between the skills learned across modules. The students really liked that there was a wide variety of methods used to deliver feedback, including audio, video, and face-to-face in addition to written comments.

Feedback is useful to help you understand where you can improve and what areas you need to work on. Better and clearer instructions on learning aids such as Moodle would help clear up feedback and would make the learning process easier. E.g. if you found something you were unsure of-searching a topic in a search bar with your topic would help (2<sup>nd</sup> year student Programme D)

For Programme D, feedback is more than some comments in the margin of an assignment. The feedback provided in Programme D is structured in a way that it automatically feeds into the next assignment or towards future learning. The feedback opportunities and methods ranged from written comments, audio or video feedback, face-to-face meeting, and dialogues that encouraged conversation between staff and students. The modes of assessment and feedback echoed the types of things that students will be asked to do once they are in industry, and the feedback is presented in the modes that students could expect from their employers. The feedback in Programme D works on the notion of what many in the field term 'feedforward' but for the purpose of this study is being labelled as feedback. It is more than just making notes of the errors in the given assignment, but it is thinking about what will help the students as they move through their programme of study. As Freire (1970) writes, 'For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (p.61-2).

#### *4D.4 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK*

In stark contrast to Programme A, staff on Programme D believed that feedback is simply another teaching opportunity, so students are provided comments that are both constructive and informative for future learning. Formative assessment was built into each module in the

programme, and those formative tasks were directly related to the summative task at the end of the module. Much of the formative feedback provided is specific to the individual rather than a general summary or group feedback. The personal feedback, along with the attitude of the lecturers that feedback was merely another opportunity for student learning made it easier for students to engage with the feedback they were provided and use it as a learning tool.

Staff in Programme D felt that formative feedback was crucial for student learning, and that it was considered good teaching practice in the programme. As the programme leader mentioned:

formative for us is just about teaching, you know, it's a, we probably have a different mindset to anybody else for a start I would say in terms of the way that we approach it, it's always the way that [people in the industry] think, we think about the way we always develop, rather than learning something and that's it, you say, well, I've learned that, what else can I do with it, you know so I guess that process of like formative assessment for us we see as about much more of general teaching. And I mean, I think that the formality of it all, I mean, yeah, we would definitely put in formative assessment, but I don't see it as being something that is forced.

He went on to add though

I don't like the idea of it being compulsory and thinking of it that way. I know that it is good practice to have it, yeah, um, the way that I would define it is it is not about assessment, it is about learning. You know, and I know that you obviously have to have that point where somebody critiques the work, but, you know, I don't see it has being assessment as such because coming from [the programme], formative, well anything that is formative for us is just about teaching, you know, it's a, we probably have a different mindset to anybody else for a start I would say in terms of the way that we approach it, it's always the way that [we] think, we think about the way we always develop, rather than learning something and that's it, you say, well, I've learned that, what else can I do with it, you know so I guess that process of like formative assessment for us we see as about much more of general teaching. And I mean, I think that the formality of it all, I mean, yeah, we would definitely put in formative assessment, but I don't see it as being something that.

Bradley went on to discuss the danger of making it a formal process. He felt that if it was something that was going to become a formal process that had to be accounted for, then it might as well be marked, and it means that it is not part of the learning design.

I think it should just be part and parcel for what you do in your teaching...Learning design. You know, so, rather than thinking about, you know, what it is you are doing in your curriculum and how you are going to assess that, it is about what is the pathway to get people to learn that, you know, and the design has to be there in the curriculum and has to map to that and the points where you need to break in and say, well, we need to check learning at this point is a sense a check in learning rather than formative assessment that is formalized.

This led to a discussion on how the university was having programmes rewrite their module descriptors, and how it had to explicitly state how the formative feedback was going to be done and when. Bradley was having trouble following the university guidelines and expectations around formative assessment. He felt the creativity and the informality of the current formative feedback system was working well within the programme.

Bradley Younger expressed a similar dedication to creating a space for dialogue (Carless, 2016) with the students.

So yeah because we know the students so well we do take an interest in them and it makes these conversations where it is not such great feedback you've got to give, it makes it so much easier and one of the caveats that we always have, is that if students don't understand any of the feedback, they just get in touch. and we say we are not just averse to giving you the mark and walking away we're saying if you don't understand anything that we have told you in terms of formative or summative assessment, please just make an appointment and we will have a chat.

#### *4D.5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS*

Students are welcome to have a very active role in the feedback process. Bradley mentioned a meeting with a student. He noted that the student had received a low mark for what the student felt was a flawless piece of work. Bradley mentioned that he was able to have an open and honest discussion with the student and discuss where the student had failed to meet the marking criteria and that the low grade was not something that the markers came to for no reason. The student was able to respond to the feedback and speak their mind. He mentioned that he was more than happy to sit down and have the chat and that the student left the meeting with a better understanding of the mark and what could be improved next time.

The continuing formative opportunities, and the belief that feedback is just another teaching opportunity allowed for students to be exposed to a lot of feedback and learn how that feedback can help them build their skills as they move through the programme. Their opportunities for peer feedback mean that they also have the opportunity to practice with feedback. Students create a good working relationship with staff and with each other that allows for the feedback to be used as a learning tool.

#### *4D.6 CONCLUSION*

Programme D is another programme in the School of Arts & Creative Industry. They are the only programme utilising a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback. They have worked as a team to create a programme that not only viewed their assessments as opportunities for students to build on their skills, but they felt that feedback was just another learning tool and

it was built into all aspects of the programme. According to the survey, students in Programme D are the happiest with their feedback and had ample opportunity to create a dialogue with staff that started with their feedback.

## 4E PROGRAMME E

### *4E.1 PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION*

Programme is an undergraduate programme in the School of Applied Sciences. According to the programme handbook:

The applied nature of this course develops skills that make you more employable, including team working, problem solving, research, communication and IT. As well as specialist analytical and numerical skills, you will be able to collect biological data and communicate scientific information. The skills you will gain prepare you for work in a number of areas. You can also continue on to postgraduate study, including possible PhD and further academic study.

You will learn through a variety of different methods, including lectures, tutorials, field studies and laboratory classes. A variety of assessment methods are used, including examination, assignments and practical assessments. These are balanced across the programme to provide a challenging assessment experience, which allows you to do your best

### *4E.2 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE*

Like Programme B, Programme E is accredited by an outside governing body. They declined to share their programme demographics for the study. Although Programme E is not utilising a programme-focused approach to feedback (they did not see their modules as connected, and did not sit together and plan how feedback and assessment could be linked between modules.), they were very interested in how expanding the variety of feedback options into the modules would help student engagement. The programme leader is very interested in moving his programme to programme-focused to help give everyone, the students, the staff, and the admin support a chance to engage with each other and with the learning. The literature shows that this can help



create a strong partnership between staff and students and can actually help in terms of student engagement with feedback, and learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Deeley, 2014; Healey, Flint, and Harrington, 2014; Sambell & Graham, 2011; Stefani, 1998).

#### 4E.3 ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES OF THE PROGRAMME

The assessment breakdown, including formative and summative assessments was compiled by the programme and shared with me in an attempt to expedite the audit process. They were then compiled into the form used by the audit report so that it would mirror the other participating programmes.

**Table 12 Breakdown of assessments Programme E**

	Types of Assessment	Varieties	Summative	Formative	Exams	Return Times
	Exams; literature review; essays + abstract; critical analysis of research paper; annotated bibliography, quantitative data analysis; diagnostic/formative draft-redraft essay	4	10	0	10	21 days
	Short conceptual explanations; primary source-based research essays, lab reports, online quizzes	5	32	37	0	21 days
	Research proposal; presentation;	6	17	1	0	21 days

	dissertation; brief	policy				
Total			15	59	38	10
						21 days

### Summary categorisation of assessment

Volume of assessment: 107  
Volume of summative assessment: 59  
Volume of formative only assessment: 38  
Variety of assessment methods: 15  
Percentage from examinations: >1%  
Timeliness: 21 days

Programme E has a lot of assignments listed in their assessment breakdown that are labelled as formative, but they are listed as tutorial work or are simply listed as formative activity without providing further detail.

#### 4E.4 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK

The staff in Programme E were very interested in the feedback process. The programme leader explicitly supported the notion of feedback as dialogue and hoped that more staff would start engaging with feedback in this way. He talked about what he hoped the programme could do to help students engage with the feedback they were receiving. As Richard Alexander stated:

Student engagement with feedback. The move to face to face is important. Engage as a team, student and lecturer

They were interested in providing strong feedback to students, but also interested in the feedback the students provided and how that could be used to enhance teaching practices. Staff were available to meet with students, and many of the students liked that they were being introduced to a variety of types of feedback. In one module, the students mentioned that they

were particularly happy with the audio feedback they received because not only did they feel they were getting more feedback that way, but they felt like it was more of feedback as dialogue because they could hear the lecturer. It allowed them to take in negative feedback as something to help them improve rather than a personal attack on the students' character.

Looking at writing on a paper is so disconnected, it doesn't feel like a lecturer's looked over it, it just feels like a computer has gone over it or some blob, whereas like, the audio file, and when we went to the meeting with him, you get this impression that they've read it, and with the audio file, you could tell that he was just sitting there having his lunch and he had just finished reading it and these were his thoughts and that's just what you want. You want what people are thinking while the ideas are fresh

I find all of [a particular professor's] feedback to be really good, the module that we did with him is the module that I got the best marks in ever because the whole time it was constantly meetings and meetings and discussing things and we had to do diaries or whenever we got to [the fieldwork] to when we got to the end and so I find that really good and then [the professor] went over them and we had an interview about them as well and he'd say well why do you feel this way and go through everything with me (Laura).

The approachability of the staff was a common comment among the students. The first-year students were happy that they would be able to approach their lecturers if they needed help. Only one student in the first year mentioned on the survey that the staff do not seem very proactive in terms of helping students who need extra support. The student went on to write that when they asked if it was possible to fail a first-year module, and the lecturer did not know the answer. As another first year student wrote:

They've always said, and they say it every time we have a lecture, please don't hesitate in contacting us. One of our modules, there is actually a box in the lecture room and at the end of the lecture if there is something that you want to ask anonymously, if there is something you want to ask the teacher, you can put a piece of paper with your question or whatever it is in the box and our lecturer is really nice and he's always answering

online, which is really good. It's always on a weekly, if not daily basis. So that's really nice.

#### *4E.5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS*

It is unclear if students have a formal role in the feedback process, but it is clear that many staff are using the formative assessments as a chance to build a dialogue with the students. The students collect and engage with the feedback because of the many formative opportunities. Students are provided many opportunities to provide feedback to staff though, and many mentioned that the staff actually took on board the feedback to make changes to the way lectures were structured or the way that feedback was provided. Students were generally happy with the way that they received the feedback.

#### *4E.6 CONCLUSION*

Programme E is a programme in the School of Applied Science. While they do not follow a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback, many of the staff have tried to think about their assessment and feedback and how it relates to other courses on the programme. The programme leader is interested if students might be more engaged with their learning if it is easier for students to make connections between their modules. Staff try and provide students feedback in a variety of methods including audio feedback and face-to-face meetings. While it is unclear if students have a role in the feedback policy, there is space for them to utilise feedback as the start of a dialogue. Students find the staff very approachable and they like the different methods of feedback, especially the audio and face-to-face meetings.

## 4.6 SUMMARY

### 4.6.1 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

Programme A had a very modularised programme structure. There are over 100 different ways for a student to get through the programme. The optional modules come from across the university, and students from other programmes are allowed on the Programme A modules. While providing students with a multitude of options may seem like something that is good for students, the abundance of choice means that many of the students fail to make connections between the modules as they move through the programme of study (Morris, 2000; Gellert 1999;). In this structure, the confusion means that students often fail to understand how the feedback they receive in a module can help them in future learning (Hughes et al., 2015). This modularised structure means that students are going through the programme as a tick box list they need to complete to trade for the degree. As the AEQ showed, Programme A noted a decline in their view of the usefulness of feedback as they progressed in through their programme of study.

In contrast to Programme A, Programmes B has a programme structure where modules build on each other as the students move through the programme. Staff felt that there was a cohesion in the programme and that the students should be able to make the connections between the modules. While many of compulsory modules have that connection in terms of module content, they lack the cohesion in terms of assessment and feedback practices. The students noted a lack of coherence in the programme often made it difficult for the students to make sense of what

they were supposed to do. They felt that this structure meant that they were constantly having to learn new types of assessment and feedback expectations to be able to be successful in the modules.

Programmes C and D focus on the creative industries, and their programmes are structured so that the skills fostered and developed in a module in the first year are built upon, honed, and utilised in the entirety of the degree programme and the professional career that comes after the degree. The optional modules are fewer in number and have more of a connection to the subject matter in the programmes. Programme C hopes that connections between the modules is apparent to the students, but they are aware that their problem is not with the module content, but with the timeliness of the feedback. The feedback is returned too late for the students to be able to utilise it in other assignments or with other projects (Edinburgh Napier has a 21-day turnaround for feedback and students mentioned that they were at five weeks and counting for some of their assignments) to be useful, or that the feedback that they received was too vague, or too assignment-specific to be something that they could use (Carless & Boud, 2018; McLean, Bond, & Nicholson, 2015; O'Donovan, 2017).

Programme D is the only one of the participating programmes that clearly has a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback. They restructured their programme a year before they participated in the study and worked very hard to make the connections between the modules evident. The modules build on each other with students being able to use the feedback

from one module to another, with the aid of the teaching staff. The staff structured the programme to build in feedback as a teaching opportunity, and made sure that there are consistent practices, as well as a lot of reminders from staff how to use the feedback to help them in other areas. This structure allows for students to interact with staff and provides ample opportunity for feedback.

Programme E is a programme on the brink of transition. While the programme is structured like Programmes B and C, they are working to become like Programme D and adopt a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback so that students can further understand the connections between their modules. There are a select number of staff that are starting to be explicit about the how the feedback they provided will help students in other modules, and how the modules link. The students in Programme E were very vocal about how much they appreciate the feedback they received, and how those connections between assignments could be made.

#### 4.6.2 TYPES OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK UTILISED ON THE PROGRAMMES

Programme A was the first programme to admit that none of their assessments were formative.

Christopher, the programme leader on Programme A, noted in the course of his interview that although the university expects that there is a formative assessment on each module, and the Programme A course descriptions will mention formative assessment, there is no activity on the programme that fulfil the requirements as set out in the definition.

Much like Programme A, Programme B did not provide students with formative assessment options until the final project. The students have staged assignments for the dissertation, but the modules do not have any formative tasks. The programme is worried about having to include formative assessments. They have had conversations with the students about completing non-credit-bearing assignments, but the students have said they will not/do not have the time to complete an assignment.

Programme C had an interesting approach to formative assessment. While officially all the assignments that students complete on the modules are credit-bearing, the staff felt that their lectures, questions answered both inside class and outside counted as formative assessment. As Matthew mentioned, they had a member of staff wore a shirt to class stating 'THIS IS FEEDBACK' in the hopes that students recognise that everything that happened in class could be thought of as feedback. The students did not view conversations and questions in class as feedback though and given the delay in the return of the feedback, students do not engage with the feedback when it is returned. While the assessments that students are asked to complete mirror what the students will do when they start their careers, it is not always clear to them how to engage with the late feedback.

Programmes D and E utilised formative feedback in their modules. Programme D had staged formative assessments and used those to continue teaching opportunities with the students. The students had ample opportunity to practice their assessments and to have a dialogue with the



staff around feedback. Students understood how the feedback helped them improve upon their work. The assessments in Programme D built on each other so that students can continuously use their skills. The feedback was presented in a variety of methods, written comments, video feedback, face-to-face sessions and peer review.

While not all the modules on Programme E utilised formative assessment, many did, and the staff made sure that the formative and summative assessments were linked. There were also staff who were thinking about module connections made sure that their feedback could be utilised in other assignments. The students received feedback in a variety of formats, face-to-face, audio files, written comments, and peer feedback. The students could not always make the connections between the module assignments, but they do know how to use the feedback in the modules with a formative task.

#### 4.6.3 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK

One of the potential barriers to thinking about promoting feedback as a dialogue and promoting feedback literacy is the staff attitude toward feedback. This was an unexpected theme that emerged during data construction. The staff on Programme A questioned whether students wanted feedback, or if they were just concerned about passing a module so they could move to the next one. Staff mentioned that they couldn't remember if they had received much feedback when they were students and given that the students failed to collect their assignments, they felt that the students were not interested in more than the mark. Staff also discussed the lack of need

for feedback when the form of the assessment was an exam. The students seem to pick up on the attitude that feedback is not important, and for some of them, that is the reason they do not collect it. They also mention the comments above about feedback being vague or unhelpful, and with the belief that staff do not care, many students refrain from reaching out to staff to discuss the feedback they have received.

Staff on Programme B were aware that students were not completely satisfied with the feedback that they receive from staff. The problem with trying to adjust their feedback practice to better meet the needs of the students was that neither the staff nor the students were clear on what was missing from the feedback. Michelle discussed the students know that something is missing from the feedback, but she felt that the students did not know what, or how to explain, what was missing from the feedback they were currently receiving. She was also unsure of what the staff could do to change that though. What came across though was that the staff were willing to change and willing to listen to students.

Programme C had a very interesting attitude toward feedback. Although there is no formal formative feedback on record for the programme, the staff felt that answering questions in class, during tutorials, and through email was feedback. Students did not have a chance to practice assignments, or to get feedback related to assignments as they progressed. There was an issue of the perceived timeliness of feedback. Students were waiting months for the feedback rather than weeks. While the staff were aware that this was an issue, their focus was on the student expectation of when feedback was to be returned rather than examining whether or not there

was an issue with the feedback that could be addressed. They complained about workload and university policy that did not reflect what was realistic for the assessments that the students were completing and how long it took to provide feedback.

In stark contrast to Programme A, staff on Programme D believed that feedback is simply another teaching opportunity, so students are provided comments that are both constructive and informative for future learning. Formative assessment was built into each module in the programme, and those formative tasks were directly related to the summative task at the end of the module. Much of the formative feedback provided is specific to the individual rather than a general summary or group feedback. The personal feedback, along with the attitude of the lecturers that feedback was merely another opportunity for student learning made it easier for students to engage with the feedback they were provided and use it as a learning tool.

For Programme D, feedback is more than some comments in the margin of an assignment, or a justification of the mark to an external examiner and a few throwaway comments. The feedback provided in Programme D is structured in a way that it automatically feeds into the next assignment or towards future learning. The feedback opportunities and methods ranged from written comments, audio or video feedback, face-to-face meeting, and dialogues that encouraged conversation between staff and students. The modes of assessment and feedback echoed the types of things that students will be asked to do once they are in industry, and the feedback is presented in the modes that students could expect from their employers. The feedback in Programme D works on the notion of what many in the field term 'feedforward' but

for the purpose of this study is being labelled as feedback. It is more than just making notes of the errors in the given assignment, but it is thinking about what will help the students as they move through their programme of study. As Freire (1970) writes, 'For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other' (p.61-2) They are the only participating programme that is utilising a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback, and thus, the only programme that is thinking about how to provide feedback for students in different ways at different points in the programme.

Although Programme E is not utilising a programme-focused approach to feedback (they did not see their modules as connected, and did not sit together and plan how feedback and assessment could be linked to help the students make connections between the feedback they received in one module and the work they might do in another another), they were very interested in how expanding the variety of feedback options into the modules would help student engagement. The programme leader is very interested in moving his programme to programme-focused to help give everyone, the students, the staff, and the admin support a chance to engage with each other and with the learning.

#### 4.6.4 STUDENT ROLE IN THE FEEDBACK PROCESS

The students in Programme A were not present at meetings when policy was being created around feedback, and there was a distinct lack of engagement on the part of the students in

terms of their feedback. The students either did not get feedback (feedback is not provided on exams and 24/32 assessments in the programme were exams), or, they felt that the feedback they received was not something that they could carry forward to other assignments. Students interviewed had not been asked what type of feedback they would like to receive from staff or taught how to engage with the feedback. This has created a vicious circle where staff think students are not interested in feedback, so they don't make feedback a priority, which in turn makes the students think that staff do not care, and therefore there is no reason to engage with the feedback. The lack of formative options also halts students from being able to practice engaging with their feedback.

Programme C, much like Programme A, did not have students who were actively involved in the feedback process. As noted in Section 5.5, the staff felt that the university constraints and the students' lack of understanding of the time it takes to provide feedback keep them from being able to recognise the feedback as useful. Programme C is also structured so that students are provided feedback much the same way they will receive it when they start their careers. Students are not involved in the process because they would not be involved in the process when they are working. The students had a problem with the timeliness of the feedback, and without being involved in the process, there is a lack of understanding that providing useful feedback takes time, or that there are issues that happen with staff that can delay feedback. If students had a more active role in the feedback process, or had a stronger feedback literacy, they might not only be more satisfied with feedback that is not returned in the university approved timeframe, but also be able to use the feedback in other assignments. The lack of formative assessment, and the

chance for formative feedback that students recognise as feedback further isolates them from feedback literacy.

Programme B was the only programme that had students formally involved in discussions around assessment and feedback. The programme invited students to participate in staff away days where important discussions in, and about, the programme take place. Students have a chance to share their opinions and provide insight to what students think about what staff do. While the staff are happy to have the students at the meeting, and are very open to feedback and comments from the students, there does seem to be a lack of engagement on the part of the students in terms of how they feel about the assessments and feedback on the programme. Programme B had the lowest response rate to the survey, and none of the students participated in the interviews. This shows that it is more than just the staff attitude that determines how successful students will be in developing their feedback literacy.

Programmes D and E had very inclusive roles for students in the feedback process. Although there was no mention of students being at formal programme meetings as with the students in Programme B, the students in both Programme D and E are very active in the feedback process. The formative feedback in Programme D means that students are helping their peers, and many of the modules provide students the opportunity to meet with staff as part of the formative process to get instant feedback and start a dialogue about the work. The students are also exposed to a variety of feedback approaches that allows them to engage with their learning in

different ways. The students in Programme D were the happiest with their feedback and had the lowest decrease of the participating programmes when it came to the usefulness of the feedback.

Programme D had much the same approach to feedback in the programme. Students had multiple opportunities for formative assessment and feedback, and the feedback was presented to them in a variety of ways, including audio feedback. The students liked the audio feedback because they felt like they were sitting across from the professor who provided the feedback. Being able to hear the professor's voice put the students at ease and allowed them to engage with the feedback, even if it was not as positive as they expected. Students in Programme E also had modules where teaching time was scheduled so students had a 10-15-minute slot during the semester to sit down with lecturer and discuss their formative feedback before moving on to completing the summative assignment. The students in Programme E also had ample opportunity to provide staff with feedback at various points in the semester, and staff tried their best to respond to student feedback and make changes accordingly.

#### 4.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented the data constructed from five programmes across Edinburgh Napier University. This chapter started with a description of the participants and presented responses to the surveys. This was followed by a discussion of the university's approach to assessment and feedback. This chapter was then broken into five subchapters that presented the data constructed for each programme around the following themes:

- What is the structure of the course?

- Is there a programme-focused approach to feedback and assessment?
  - If not, is there a sustained approach to feedback in the programme?
- Staff Attitudes toward feedback
- What role do students have in the feedback process?

The following chapter will present a discussion of the findings centred around the themes.



## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This research study investigates how a programme-focused approach to curriculum design affected students' feedback literacy. This research stems from the growing focus on feedback literacy and what that implies for student engagement with feedback as a learning tool (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al, 2019; Han & Xu, 2019). Current research discusses feedback literacy as something that is learned at the module level, and something that the students must learn while they move through their programme of study. What is missing from the literature is an investigation on how the programme structure can aid, or hinder, a student in becoming feedback literate. The literature is also missing an exploration of power dynamics in the classroom and how this impacts student learning.

The previous chapter presented case studies of the participating programmes as centred around the following themes:

- What is the structure of the course?
- Is there a programme-focused approach to feedback and assessment?
  - If not, is there a sustained approach to feedback in the programme?
- Staff Attitudes toward feedback
- What role do students have in the feedback process?

This chapter will focus on a discussion of two major findings that emerged from the case studies:

- Power roles in the classroom and their effect on students' development of feedback literacy
- The importance of programme structure and programme level assessment and feedback practices on a student's chance to engage with, and continually develop their feedback literacy.

This discussion will demonstrate how the above findings move beyond the current literature and allow for a new lens with which to view, engage with, and encourage feedback literacy.

## 5.2 POWER IN THE CLASSROOM

It is important to note that all formal learning is produced in the context of power (Giroux, 1992). As McConnell (1999) writes, lecturers strive to stimulate a 'learning relationship', yet they are nevertheless constantly engaged in a power relationship. This power relationship is often communicated to students. While there has been a shift away from the notion of the 'sage on the stage' to a more student centred, learner focused model of teaching, in the eyes of the students, the unequal power dynamics between staff and students still exist (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2018). Frymier, Shulman, and Houser (2009) contend, instructors influence students' perceptions empowerment as "a communication relationship is necessary to achieve an alignment of values and actions between those acting in an empowering manner and those feeling empowered" (p. 183). There is a danger here that students then become passive learners and wait to be instructed on what learning they should do. Research used to posit that teacher power exists only to the extent that students perceive it to exist and accept it (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Now, though, research has moved to focus on the ways in which students become co-producers of knowledge and take on an active approach to their learning (Cathcart, Greer, & Neale, 2014; Kemp, 2013). This means that the function of the teacher is no longer one of the imparters of knowledge, but one of a guide and a source of support while students construct their knowledge ('Sage on the stage' or 'Guide on the side,' 2019.)

In the classroom, power hierarchies come from the notion that some students bring with them. When students enter university, they see the lecturer as all-knowing, set up on a pedestal, while they (the student) are at the bottom of the mountain in need of extensive training and knowledge (Cummins 1994; Devine 2003). This is further enforced when staff provide less than helpful feedback, or question whether students even want feedback without having that discussion with the students. These notions can keep students from asking questions or really engaging with their learning if they feel that there will always be the potential for them to fall short (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017). These fears can hinder students from becoming autonomous learners or feel that they can take ownership over their learning (Mayes, 2010; Tippin, Lafreniere, & Page 2012). This issue around the use and understanding of language is problematic because it sets up a very clear power hierarchy within the classroom. If students do not understand the feedback they receive, or feel that they do not understand content, they might develop insecurities tied to their time in the classroom (Molloy, Borrell-Carrio, & Epstein 2013). This puts the lecturer as the one that knows all, and the student as the empty vessel to be filled.

#### 5.2.1 KNOWLEDGE AS A TRANSFER OF POWER IN THE CLASSROOM

Employing the concept of knowledge is power and power comes from having knowledge (Bacon, 1597), then creating an environment that will support the sharing of both knowledge and power becomes essential. The trouble in trying to create this type of environment is that it tends to impose a universal concept of learning that discounts different cultures and contextual situations (Hoppers, 2014). Staff attitudes toward feedback literacy, and to the environment they create in the classroom, has a major effect on how students approach their learning.

In 1668, philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote the words, *scientia potentia est* or 'knowledge is power,' and in 1870, American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: Skill to do comes of doing; knowledge comes by eyes always open and working hands; and there is no knowledge that is not power (p.303). This is not a ground-breaking discovery of linking knowledge to power, especially in higher education, with the sentiment having been echoed by theorists like Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim, Max Weber and the members of the Frankfurt School. One of the most vocal of this concept is Michel Foucault who stated that the process is 'highly wrought presentation of order, stability, authority, and regulatory power of knowledge' (Said, 2001, p.239). Knowledge as power is highly charged and political as well, based on hierarchies.

Hierarchies are the quintessential manifestation of power. They signify higher and lower ranks in a given order, domination and subordination, greater and lesser value, prestige and influence. Whenever they occur, they reflect structures of authority and power, and thus the essence of politics (Weiler, 2011 p.209).

These structures of power can be changed though. Learners should be encouraged to make decisions about their own learning including how they are assessed (Leach, Neutze, & Zepke, 2001), but there has been little evidence of these choices within this study. Traditional lecture formats involve a lecturer at the front of the room providing information and students sitting in large lecture theatres taking notes. Academic developers and higher education scholars are working hard to change these power structures though (Brantlinger & Danforth, 2006; Giroux, 2010; Macaluso & Russo, 2016). This often means that the old and familiar ways of teaching and learning practice need to be let go and allow for an alternative discourse. This 'redisciplining' of Higher Education learning (Jones, 2009) posits that learning is now operating in 'systems of [power] relations' and involves the construction of identity, or 'becoming a different person with

respect to those systems of relations' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.53). It is within that construction of identity that a student learns to negotiate the power relationships and help bolster learning. This means that students are not only learning about corrective but content, but academic skills. This identity can be built through feedback literacy and can be constructed based on the feedback that students receive throughout their programme of study.

The problem with committing to feedback literacy and committing to helping students learn how to use the feedback they receive as a learning tool for future assignments is that it is time consuming and requires a lot of space to process the information. The proper opportunity needs to be given to really become involved in the process. It is not something that will happen overnight. It might take months, or even years for staff and students to learn how to be able to have a genuine dialogue. As Huxham et al. (2015) write, using the metaphor of mountaineering:

Mountaineering is an exemplary case of process masquerading as outcome; there are myriad easier ways to the top, hence the purpose is not the peak but the route there. It is both highly constrained, in that misreading the state of the mountain or of the party can lead to disaster, and flexible, in that there are many different ways of achieving a climb. It entails enormous, lonely effort and intense, honest teamwork. (533)

The difficulty of the process coupled with the somewhat rigid structure of higher education makes it difficult to invest the time and energy into trying to change the current structures of the classroom. This includes things like labelling sessions 'lecture' or 'tutorial,' implying a one-way process of learning, timetabling, 'the uninspiring confines of the traditional classroom (however fresh the paint)' (Huxham et al., 2015, p.533). These keep staff (and students) trapped in the system of education that allows students a chance to sit back and be passive participants in their learning process. Add to that the pressure to publish, provide feedback in tight time constraints,

and the ever-shrinking time allocated for marking, it is hard for staff to have the space for this dialogic classroom. It is easy for feedback to be pushed further down the list of priorities and for staff to fall back on traditional feedback structures. This in turn means that feedback literacy is often dismissed.

For the purpose of this study, the conversation that will help balance the power structures in the classroom (whether self-imposed or otherwise) is the conversation that can happen with feedback as the topic starter. In this study, Critical Theory is being used as a lens in which people can identify the actions needed to help encourage feedback literacy. This lens helps encourage staff to help students become feedback literate by teaching them to 'read' their feedback so that they can use it as a learning tool and engage with it in a more meaningful way. This will help balance the power roles between staff and students and hopefully encourage students to enter a dialogue with their lecturers, with their peers, and even with themselves and become more autonomous learners.

Shor (1992) argued that for students to succeed in engaging with their learning, they need the space to feel supported. By allowing students a classroom environment that encourages them to become more critically engaged, the hope is that students will carry that critical engagement with them outside of the classroom and into society. Shor (1992) argues that providing these examples of critical thinking and learning to students that will help them expand their capabilities for questioning systems, institutions, and even social structures. In the book, Shor (1992) writes,

'Banks (1971) defined empowerment in terms of transforming self and society: 'A curriculum designed to empower students must be transformative in nature and help students develop the knowledge, skills and values needed to become social critics' (131)' (p. 16). Feedback is the perfect opportunity to help students make these changes and increase their feedback literacy. This discussion around power in the classroom, and the power relationship between staff and students, is missing from the current research around feedback literacy and what can help students develop their feedback literacy skills. However, it is evidenced strongly in the primary data for this study.

### 5.3 STAFF ATTITUDES TOWARD FEEDBACK

With the notion of discourse as power, and the hierarchies that are constructed between staff and students, the attitudes that staff have toward feedback, and the development of students' feedback literacy is important. The current research around feedback literacy does not discuss the staff attitudes toward feedback, and what that means for the students who are trying to strengthen their feedback skills. While the current literature discusses the attitudes of the people who wish to become feedback literate, they fail to discuss how important the attitude of the person providing the feedback is. The previous chapter demonstrated how the attitudes of staff toward feedback impacts on the students achieving feedback literacy over the course of their degree. The lecturers' commitment to providing feedback helps students see the value in what is provided for them. Eraut (2006) writes:

When students enter higher education . . . the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence, we need to know much more about how their learning,

indeed their very sense of professional identity, is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on feedback. (p. 118)

During the interviews with the programme lead as well as the lecturers, the question of whether students wanted feedback was raised more than once. The general attitude in Programme A was that providing feedback to the students was a waste of time as students rarely returned to collect their essays or assignments or looked past the grade on TurnItIn. Staff felt that many of the students were simply interested in the diploma at the end of the programme, and the learning that happened during the four years was not important. This sweeping generalisation about what the students want out of their university experience is reinforcing power roles where the teachers think they know best and impose those beliefs on the student. For Freire, 'there's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom' (Freire, 1970, p. 14). These assumptions about what the students want from their education has brought about a conformity to the current environment.

When staff dismiss whether students want feedback, they are potentially harming the students' future learning identity. Staff are in a position of power, and if they are not interested in providing feedback to the students, it will be difficult for them to build their feedback literacy skills. This can keep students meek and passive, applying surface level learning to the subjects and moving through their programme simply banking knowledge to regurgitate on an exam or for an assignment (Bok, 2003; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Shumar, 1997). As shown in the previous chapter, Programme A has created a vicious feedback loop in which students felt the vague feedback was unhelpful, or that lecturers were not interested in helping them. Lecturers take the



lack of engagement with feedback to mean that the students are not interested in doing more than the bare minimum to pass a module, and thus only need the bare minimum in terms of feedback. This has left both staff and students in the programme very frustrated, but at an apparent stalemate about what to do to change the environment. Research has shown that useful feedback is important for advancing student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Carless, 2018), yet Programme A does not view this as something that students necessarily need to advance in the programme. 'But true teacher-student dialogue cannot exist if the teacher continues to regard students as 'ignorant' (71) and their minds are closed to the knowledge that students bring to the classroom. It must encourage/develop 'critical thinking' (Freire, 1970, p. 73). The data constructed across the five programmes showed that Programme A had the largest decrease in the use and perception of the usefulness of feedback. According to the staff, students failed to collect assignments once they had been marked and opted to just view their mark from their student record. In the programmes that were committed to good feedback, though, students collected their assignments, or met with staff for the face-to-face feedback. The students in Programme E mentioned how happy they were when they received audio feedback, and the students in Programme D told staff that they liked the chance to discuss their feedback.

Students are left without a say in their learning, and potentially left without a voice or way to become an autonomous learner. 'A campaign must be waged against the corporate view of higher education as merely a training centre for future business employees, a franchise for generating profits, a research centre for the military, or a space in which corporate culture and education merge in order to produce literate consumers' (Giroux, 2010). This commodification

of learning, along with overassessment, the stress and pressures of being at university, and the busyness that students face outside the university context can keep students from really engaging in the deep learning required to become critical learners. In an environment such as this, students might opt for more of a surface learning. When it comes to deep and surface learning, 'one involves relating ideas and looking for patterns or principles, while the other concentrates on checking evidence and examining the argument closely' (Entwistle et al, 2001). When students are engaged in the meaningful (instead of rote) learning, students can start to explore the possibility of becoming critical thinkers and critical social beings outside the classroom (Barnett, 1997; Freire, 2003; hooks, 1994; Freiberg, 1969).

### 5.3.1 STAFF FEEDBACK LITERACY

The current literature around feedback literacy discusses what can be done to encourage the feedback literacy of students, but while the focus is on the students, there is only one sentence in one article that mentions that the staff needs to be feedback literate along with the students Xu and Carless (2017). Before students' feedback literacy can be fully supported, staff needs to be confident in their own feedback literacy. While the literature notes that:

For feedback processes to be enhanced, students need both appreciation of how feedback can operate effectively and opportunities to use feedback within the curriculum (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1315)

While it is true that students need the appreciation and the opportunities to use feedback, the same is true of the staff. The staff needs to feel confident in their feedback ability in order to then transfer those skills to the students.

while it is true that feedback is a learner-centred process, and that students may engage in feedback processes with various agents, the predominant source of feedback comments in higher education is generally the educator (Bearman et al. 2016). Therefore, understanding the experiences, including challenges, of educators is as important as those of the student (Boud and Molloy 2013) (Henderson et al, 2019, p. 1238).

The same care that the current research is asking to be put in the student skills should be applied to staff. Consideration needs to be given to staff challenges around feedback and what can be done to minimise these where possible. The Staff needs time to understand the different types of feedback they can provide and what it means and how it can help students. Then staff can explain and teach the students how to engage with it and use it on future assignments. One staff member in Programme E is working this into the assessment explanations and the formative assessment tasks. This member of staff scheduled face-to-face sessions with students so they could sit with the students and walk them through the feedback and how it can be used to help with the formative assessment.

### 5.3.2 ACADEMIC VOCABULARY AND THE FOUNDATION OF FEEDBACK LITERACY

There is a danger that many students assume that because academic vocabulary, the role of feedback in learning, and even basic assessment literacy is not explained to them, it is something that they should have already learned. This leads to students to potentially perceive that they are less intelligent to staff and to their peers for the gaps in their knowledge (Hathaway, 2015; Murray & Nallaya, 2016). Robinson (2011) highlights the way in which the language used in feedback can form a barrier to understanding. He states:

Most often, the 'standard' language (such as Standard English) is taken from the speech of the elite. Such an elevation of a particular hegemonic language suppresses the heteroglossia of multiple everyday speech-types. Everyday speech is commanded to

conform to official style so as to be recognised as part of a privileged, closed-off speech-community. (np)

This sets students up as automatically inferior to the person standing at the front of the room, or those around them who might already possess the knowledge. As Freire (1970) writes:

But one does not liberate someone by alienating them. Authentic liberation--the process of humanization--is not another deposit to be made in a person. Liberation is a praxis: action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking [pedagogical] methods of domination (propaganda, slogans--deposits) in the name of liberation. (p.79)

If students are going to become successful learners, and take ownership over their learning, then they need to feel that they can ask questions, to disagree, and to have a voice in the classroom.

The classroom needs to become an environment that encourages questions and conversations and encourages a dialogue. This means that the conversation becomes a dialogue, rather than a monologue. Participation in the conversation needs to come from both staff and students. Again though, Freire is quick to point out what this conversation should **not** look like, writing:

This dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between those who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth. (p.88-9)

What Freire is saying is that the dialogue is not about one person giving the 'right' answer for the other person to consume, but is about providing a chance for learning, a chance to share ideas and come to an understanding and a sharing of knowledge. It is not about banking the knowledge but co-creating it. Feedback, and feedback literacy is a starting place for this dialogue. As

McArthur and Huxham (2012) write: 'feedback as dialogue celebrates the uncertain nature of learning. It recognises the way in which learning occurs at the intersection of shared knowledge and individual perspectives' (p. 100).

### 5.3.3 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Utilising formative feedback to help students learn what feedback is, how to use it, and how it can help them is just the tip of the iceberg to helping with students view feedback as a learning tool. One of the main arguments to this study is the notion that for students to see the value of feedback, they need to be taught not only the purpose of feedback, but how to use it. Students need to be exposed to a variety of approaches to feedback and need to be given the opportunity to practice using the feedback as a learning tool (Sweller, Ayers and Kalyuga, 2011). In order to develop a competence in this area, the process needs to be thought of as interconnected. The feedback that the students get is 'just another learning opportunity.' As Sheppard et al. (2009) write:

Developing the expertise of professional practice is an iterative process. Thus the ideal learning trajectory is a spiral, with all components revisited at increasing levels of sophistication and interconnection. Learning in one area supports learning in another.

This is where formative feedback supports students learning. This is the opportunity to help students have a chance to practice the skill of using feedback to help them improve. The purpose of formative feedback is to provide students the opportunity to improve their performance for a summative assignment (Hattie, 2008). Formative feedback is not only a chance for students to learn how to improve their performance on the assignment, but it is a chance for them to learn, and then perfect their skills of using feedback as a learning tool. It is through these non-credit

bearing assignments that students can be taught how to use various types of feedback without the fear of making mistakes, or being penalised in the form of a bad mark. The literature shows that this can help create a strong partnership between staff and students, and can actually help in terms of student engagement with feedback, and learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, n.d.; Deeley, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Stefani, 1998; Sambell & Graham, 2010).

Many of the students in this study admitted that they did not always do the formative assessment because they did not see how it was going to help them, and it was not mandatory. Some of the students mentioned a frustration with completing the formative assessment task only to get general group feedback that they could not work out. Many felt that the group feedback was hard to understand, and without knowing if it applied to their work or not, was generally ignored. This suggested that there was a lack of understanding of how to read the group feedback, and how to use it to improve for future work. There were two programmes that used formative assessment as a chance to prepare students for the summative assessments, and the students in those programmes had an easier time engaging with both the assignment and the feedback provided.

Formative assessment, when done correctly, serves as a practice for the summative assessment. The formative feedback is the chance for a student to learn the purpose of feedback and learn how to use it. The dialogue here happens by way of example and the encouragement of questions. If an environment were created where students see the formative assessment as a low stakes' assignment, and a chance to make mistakes, then the hope is that they would use the

formative feedback to help them in the completion of the summative task. This only works though if the formative task relates to the summative task. This also only works if the feedback provided is done so in a way that encourages improvement in future tasks. What can come from it though is the formation of critically aware students who are able to take charge of their education. 'Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges teacher-student and student-teachers' who are 'jointly responsible for a process in which both grow' (Freire, 1970, p.80).

#### 5.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING A VARIETY OF FEEDBACK OPTIONS TO STUDENTS

In addition to providing students with formative assessment opportunities to practice using their feedback, students need to be exposed to a variety of feedback types and styles to help build their feedback literacy. It is important that students are exposed to a range of assessment and feedback styles that are appropriate to the programme and discipline of study, and that fit with the Learning Outcomes (Biggs 1999; Habeshaw, Gibbs, and Habeshaw 1993). This means moving beyond more traditional assessments like essays and exams where appropriate and providing feedback as more than just written comments. Programme C was holding mock exhibits, Programme D was holding showcases that were open to the public, Programme E was utilising fieldwork and fieldtrips to help assess students skills and development.

It is possible to give the students too many options though, and not every assessment and feedback option will be appropriate for the programme. This means that exams may be the most practical way to assess modules that have 100, 200 or more students. It might mean that group

feedback is going to be the most practical way to provide feedback to large groups. A feedback literacy is a varied one, but it also emphasises a few staple types of feedback that are most appropriate to the programme. The exposure to different types of feedback, coupled with the formative assessment, allows students the chance to practice using the feedback will allow students the chance to develop their feedback literacy as they progress through their programme. Programme D mapped their assessments across the programme, with each assignment having a formative element, so the students have ample opportunity to develop their skills. Programme E is trying to shift to this model so that students can see the links in their modules and practice using formative feedback.

Current research on feedback literacy discusses the need for students to understand how to use feedback, and while that is essential, students also need to be aware of the different approaches to feedback and how to use them as a learning tool. As discussed in the previous chapter, Students in Programme A were struggling with their feedback literacy because they were mainly assessed through exam. This meant that they were not receiving feedback, and in the few instances where they were receiving feedback, the students were seemingly uninterested in engaging with it. Programme D on the other hand, provided students with a variety of feedback options, and had formative assessment built into the programme to allow students the chance to practice receiving and using, and engaging with the different approaches to feedback.



One of the differences between the programmes was the approach to feedback. Students in Programme D are taught what feedback they will receive while on the programme and how they can use that feedback to help them. They then have several opportunities to complete formative assessments and practice utilising the feedback they receive. Staff in Programme D have created an environment that allows the students to ask questions about the feedback and encourages the dialogue between staff and students in the process of developing feedback literacy.

This is the opportunity to teach feedback literacy as a foundational skill, to think of feedback literacy the same way that one would think of literacy as it pertains to learning to read. Students need to be guided, need to be introduced and instructed on the different approaches to feedback before they can be expected to understand and engage with them.

## 5.5 RETHINKING SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

In addition to including formative assessment and the opportunities for formative feedback and allowing students the chance to engage with a variety of assessment and feedback approaches, the approach to summative feedback needs to change. This approach needs to be considered in a programme focused approach so that the summative assignments and the feedback provided can more easily link to future assignments. Summative feedback needs to become formative feedback. What this means is that the summative assessment needs to be provided in a way that looks toward future assignments. This means creating links between the current assignment and assignments in other modules, or future assignments that students might encounter. The

assessment map created utilizing a programme focused approach means that staff can be explicit when discussing these links with students.

It is not just about making links between the modules though. This is about providing the right type of feedback. The feedback cannot just be content, but the style, the arguments, and the how rather than the what makes it so students can take it forward. It needs to be a balance between the assignment that the feedback is being provided on and the skills that students will need to complete future assignments. This means that if a student writes an essay for one module, the feedback will have some commentary that is specific to the given prompt, but the feedback will then focus on how to structure an argument in future essays. This is also why the staff feedback literacy is important. When staff are feedback literate, they can tailor their feedback to help the students understand how to make the connections no matter how it is presented.

In order to make the links more explicit for the students, a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback should be considered. When those links between assessments are created at the programme level, it can help create a more coherent learning experience. If those links are in place from the start, then it will be easier for staff to help make the connections between modules for the students. It will allow staff to plan assessment and feedback approaches and make the links so students can learn how to use the feedback they receive and develop their feedback literacy skills. Skills can be reinforced throughout the programme when

there is a programme map to help identify those connections. While there is a lot of research around programme focused approaches to assessment and feedback, the research focuses on how this approach can bolster student satisfaction and the students' experience but does not discuss what this approach means for feedback literacy. The same is true for the literature around feedback literacy. Much of the research in this area focuses on the work that can be done at the module level, or what can be done by the students to develop their skills. This research demonstrates that there is work that can be done at the programme level that can make the work done at the module level, and even at the student level easier.

## 5.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined a discussion for the importance of programme structures and staff attitudes toward approaches to assessment and feedback. It further discusses what this means in terms of helping students develop their feedback literacy skills. This study demonstrates that a programme focused approach to assessment and feedback allows the students the best possibility to be able to develop their feedback literacy skills. When assessments are mapped at the programme level, staff have a better understanding of what is expected of students across the programme. These connections, along with a chance to complete formative assessment tasks allows students the opportunity to practice using feedback and connecting their learning between modules.

In order for the programme focused approach to effectively help students develop their feedback literacy, the role of the staff in the process needs to be acknowledged. Despite learner-focused approaches to learning and teaching that most educators adopt as their chosen method of teaching, some students still enter university believing that there are power hierarchies in place that have staff placed above students. This perceived power relationship needs to be acknowledged because the way students view staff potentially plays a role in how the students engage with feedback. Because of this, staff feedback literacy is an essential prerequisite for effective programme-focused feedback, which in turn develops feedback literacy in students.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

**“If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed”  
— Paulo Freire**

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to examine how a programme-focused approach to curriculum design affected a students’ feedback literacy. This research stems from the growing focus on feedback literacy and what that implies for student engagement with feedback as a learning tool (Carless & Boud, 2018a; Dawson et al., 2019; Han & Xu, 2019).. This research adopts a socially constructed view of how data is generated and uses Critical Theory as a frame to help understand the effects of a programme structure on a student’s feedback literacy. This study interprets the programme structure and the feedback practices of staff and students as shared through surveys, focus groups and interviews with staff and students from participating programmes. The data generated, and the observations made from the data, is framed within the context of the participants identities and understanding of the assessment and feedback practices. This is in line with my socially constructed world view, which states that data can be viewed from many perspectives (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). The objective nature of reality cannot be captured. In the case of this study, the ‘reality’ of the programmes is filtered through my interpretation. The assessment and feedback practices of the participating programmes therefore, can only be considered through the data I collected from the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This chapter will bring the study to a close with a final summary of the arguments presented in the previous chapters as well as recommendations for programmes that are interested in

prioritizing feedback literacy as part of programme and curriculum design. The chapter will start with a summary of the research methods and then a short presentation of the answers to the research questions. These summaries will be framed considering the study's original contribution to knowledge and how it helps advance the field of feedback literacy. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for programmes who wish to adopt a programme-focused approach to assessment and feedback and are interested in making students' feedback literacy a priority in programme and curriculum design.

## 6.2 RESEARCH METHODS

As a Social Constructivist, I believe that the data was co-constructed with the participants rather than something that was waiting to be uncovered. There were four methods utilised when constructing the data:

- **Programme Audit/Programme Leader Interview**-Hard data is collected with the programme lead that illuminates the 'planned curriculum.' The audit reflects on the number of formative and summative assessments, the proportion of exams, variety of assessment, and the amount of oral and written feedback a student receives.
- **Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ)** - a 28 question survey based on assessment principles. This survey is distributed to students.
- **Focus Groups**-This offers a chance for students to give a voice to the trends found in the audit and AEQ
- **Interviews with module leaders and lecturers**-This offers a chance to give staff a voice to the trends found in the AEQ and the programme audit

As a research tool, TESTA places the emphasis on what is best for student learning as they move through their programme of study. The programme audit allowed me to map the programme and helped me focus questions for the programme lead and the staff. It also allowed for an in-

depth look at the structure of each programme, and how the five programmes differed. The AEQ and the focus groups with the students allowed me to gain a better understanding of how the students feel about the assessment and feedback practices in their programme. It allowed the chance to understand how involved they are in the feedback process, and whether there was an interest in strengthening or repositioning students in the feedback process. The interviews with module leaders and lecturers are not a part of the TESTA methodology, but I felt that in order to create an accurate picture of what was happening in each programme I needed to include the voices of everyone who is a part of the programme.

### 6.3 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As discussed in Chapter Two, the research questions came from the gap in the current literature on feedback literacy. The discussion in the current literature focused on building students' feedback literacy at the individual student, or the individual module level. There is no discussion on what could be done at the programme level, or in terms of curriculum design that would help students gain a strong feedback literacy. The focus of the feedback literacy research also skews toward student feedback literacy, with the importance of staff feedback literacy largely ignored. As such, the research questions for this study focused on programme characteristics and staff attitudes toward feedback and what that means for students' development of feedback literacy.

#### 6.3.1 HOW CAN PROGRAMME DESIGN INFLUENCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEEDBACK LITERACY OVER TIME?

The research generated in this study showed that the development of feedback literacy is easier for students who are part of a programme that takes a programme focused approach to

assessment and feedback. The programme focused approach allowed students a better opportunity to make connections between modules and connections between assignments. When assessments are mapped at the programme level, staff have the opportunity to help students make those connections and tailor feedback to explicitly highlight the connection between the feedback and future work. Students learn to view feedback as something that relates to future work and not just a response to the completed assignment.

The students who were part of modularised programmes had a harder time making connections between the feedback they received in one module and future assignments. Students in this type of programme did not engage with the feedback when it was provided and took the view that because they were able to just choose from a list of modules to get their degree that there were connections that they could make between classes.

### 6.3.2 HOW DO ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEEDBACK LITERACY OVER TIME?

One of the most important findings from the data generated in this study was that the staff attitude toward assessment and feedback contributes to the students' development of their feedback literacy. When the staff assume that students do not want feedback, or that they automatically understand how to use the feedback they have received, they spend less time completing feedback. The message then from staff is that feedback is not important and does not need the same time and attention as other components of the module or programme. This also means that there might be fewer opportunities for students to engage with feedback, and



the potential to be exposed to a variety of approaches to feedback. Staff, the ones that are providing the feedback, must be invested in the process and encourage students to engage with it. In contrast, the staff who view feedback as another teaching opportunity, or view feedback as the start of a dialogue with the students, provide feedback using a variety of methods, and create an environment for students to practice using feedback to improve future work.

Another hindrance to the development of feedback literacy is the way in which feedback is explained in a programme. If students are not taught how to use feedback the same way they are taught foundational skills in the programme, it can be harder for students to engage with the feedback. The students in this study complained about group feedback, and complained that it wasn't helpful, but none of the students had been taught how to read group feedback and how to apply it to their individual work. Staff mentioned that students who were receiving oral feedback during class did not recognise that they were receiving feedback, and often missed, or disregarded those potentially helpful comments.

The programmes where students were successful in developing their feedback literacy were programmes that prioritised formative assessment and formative feedback. This allowed students a low stakes opportunity to practice the assessment, receive feedback and then potentially ask questions about the feedback in case anything was unclear. This also allowed students the opportunity to create links between the feedback and future assignments. Built into the formative assessments is a chance to explain feedback to the students and introduce them

to new approaches and how they can be used to help in future assignments. The low stakes nature of formative assessment means that students can fail without it affecting their final grade.

#### 6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrated that the structure of a programme, staff attitudes toward feedback, and even student's role in the feedback process affected their engagement with continuing feedback literacy. Exacerbating this is the fact that modules are often treated as entirely isolable and feedback practices often do not align between modules (Carless, 2006). This means that universities should consider adopting an approach to feedback beyond the modular level, and instead focus on the cohesion and connectedness of a programme focused approach to the way in which students receive feedback. A first step is for lecturers to know what is taught in other modules and to refer to the relevance of current feedback for future work. This alternative approach to feedback will help students to achieve a deeper understanding of feedback as they progress through their given programme of study, eventually becoming connoisseurs of feedback.

In addition to staff understanding other modules, it is important to build a relationship with the students. Genuine partnerships with students to change and improve teaching can lead to mutual learning and a much more sophisticated and challenging type of feedback – for example students may demand more difficult and authentic assessment tasks once they understand that the feedback they receive will assist with future learning (Huxham et al., 2015). It cannot be left solely

up to the students to actively engage with the feedback. Staff need to be engaged with the feedback and need to provide guidance about the different approaches to feedback that students will encounter. Lecturers must work with diverse students to gradually build shared understanding through a range of strategies and ongoing dialogue. This means that the student has several opportunities to engage with not only the feedback, but the lecturer as well. How students will respond to the feedback is hard to predict though. Research shows that many students will acknowledge the usefulness of using different types of feedback provided to them. 'Yet they also highlighted that knowing about these strategies and opportunities is not the same as knowing how to use them effectively' (Winstone et al., 2016, p.13). Part of the ongoing dialogue between lecturer and student would need to include the strategies for not only understanding the type of feedback they are receiving, but how to use it as a learning tool.

Within this ongoing dialogue, helping students understand academic terminology and creating a sense of cohesion between markers when grading and providing feedback will make it easier for students to actively engage with their feedback (Winstone et al., 2016). One of the purposes of a programme focused approach to feedback is to foster this environment by creating links not only between assessment and learning objectives, but between modules and future learning. This requires colleagues in programme teams to work together on the feedback options (Harland et al., 2014). The learning process should be an 'active process in which learners are active sense makers who seek to build coherent and organised knowledge' (Mayer 2004, p. 14). Students will not only have a chance to become literate in a variety of feedback options, but they will be able

start thinking about the learning process as something that they need to become an active part of (Falchikov, 2013; Baeten et al., 2013).

This change in environment will not happen overnight. It will take some dedication and determination and an adjustment into current feedback practices. The following recommendations can serve as a guide for universities that are interested in developing a programme focused approach to feedback. They are aligned with the general body of research on what constitutes good feedback practice in higher education, and hence are compatible with providing useful feedback at a modular level but aim to develop programme coherence. These recommendations are also based around what is missing from the current literature around feedback literacy. A key feature of this set of recommendations lies in the role of the student and creating a space for them to become actively engaged with their feedback as a learning tool. These are not to be thought of as a step by step guide to follow, but rather points to consider when changing the feedback environment of a programme. While rules-based approaches to feedback might be useful, they are not enough and under some circumstances might distract from the more important job of creating dialogic cultures and encouraging a students' feedback literacy. What follows is the recommendations based on the findings of the study.

- To be useful to students, programme level conversations around assessment should provide strong and clear opportunities to be directly relevant to future tasks. Feedback given after a module is complete - and with a long gap before the next assignment to which it might possibly be relevant - is not helpful in this regard. Staged assignments, blogs and projects which can all allow dialogue about ongoing work are better ways forward (Carless et al., 2011). In a programme level approach attention should also be given to supporting students to carry forward learning from feedback to future modules. Setting up class activities where students reflect on past feedback in relation to a current

assignment may be fruitful. Programme level assessment and feedback should be designed such that students explicitly revisit themes and capacities over time so that earlier feedback continues to be relevant. The demands of this work on students should build progressively over the course of a programme of study. It also should be part of an ongoing dialogue between students, their peers and teachers about what makes for high quality work (Anderson & McCune 2013; Beaumont et al., 2011; Carless et al., 2011; Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015; Tian & Lowe, 2013). Students should practice assessments tasks multiple times in the context of such dialogue. This dialogue may comprise written and oral elements as well as online and face-to-face learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Nicol 2010; Orsmond et al., 2013).

- Programme-level feedback processes should take into account the students' starting points and build gradually over time toward students being able to independently evaluate and enhance their own and others' work (Boud & Falchicov, 2006; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2010). Students' prior assessment experiences will often have involved extensive in-class guidance, repeated redrafting of work and formative feedback from teachers (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2011) so transitions away from this level of support must be gradual. Normalising the feedback and making it an everyday part of the practice can help take some of the mystery out of feedback and allow students to then slowly transition from the forms of feedback that they are used to.
- Students should be taught what feedback is and how to use it well. Many students in higher education may never have received explicit advice about how to use the feedback they receive; they need to be supported to learn to use this more effectively (Burke, 2009) and to evaluate their own work and give constructive feedback to others (Boud & Falchicov, 2006). One starting point might be exercises where students collate their feedback from several assignments and look for common themes before working with peers and teachers on interpreting these. Over time, students should become connoisseurs of feedback, able to appreciate the types without the aid of the lecturers.
- In order to teach students what feedback is and how to use it, staff need to be able to foster and strengthen their own feedback literacy before they are expected to help foster the development in students. If staff must become familiar with a variety of assessment and feedback approaches in order to teach students, then staff need time to be able to practice and learn the approaches. If staff are unsure of different approaches to feedback, they will avoid those approaches, and there is a possibility that students will not be able to fully develop their feedback literacy.

- In addition to the staffs' feedback literacy, their attitude and commitment to feedback needs to be prioritised. If staff do not feel that students want feedback, or that the feedback is an important part of a student's learning, then students will find it hard to engage with, and are potentially losing the opportunity to practice using feedback before summative assignments. Staff need to think about making the summative feedback formative. Summative feedback should include links to future assignments, and demonstrate how the feedback from one module might be used in another. This means that staff need to provide the right type of feedback, feedback that does not just comment on content, but on the style, arguments so that students can take the feedback forward. There needs to be a balance between current work and future practice.
- Lecturers need to be allowed the time to make themselves familiar with the student work they are providing feedback on, so that the suggestions given are really going to help the students learn as they progress through their programme of study. This can be done in the form of more formative assignments (Harland et al., 2014). With regards to the feedback that they supply, tutors need to spend significant time making well-informed, digestible feedback for those that they are marking for. We should expect lecturers to be spending a considerable amount of time across a programme providing feedback for students and should be suspicious of the promises of 'quick fixes'. (Claxton, 1998). Universities need to take this into consideration when adopting assessment and feedback policy.
- Through the course of their studies, students will get many types of feedback related to assessments. It is important that students are exposed to a range of assessment and feedback styles that are appropriate to the programme and discipline of study, and that fit with the Learning Outcomes (Biggs, 1999; Habeshaw, Gibbs, and Habeshaw, 1993). It is possible to give the students too many options though, and not every assessment and feedback option will be appropriate for the programme. A feedback literacy is a varied one, but it also emphasises a few staple ingredients and flavours. Students need to complete the same assignment multiple times to develop skill in discerning what makes for good work in that context.
- Students should be able to take ownership of the feedback process. Students need to understand what feedback is, and the purpose it serves in their learning. Students need to understand that no-one produces perfect work, and that constructive feedback is an opportunity for learning, rather than an indication that students are in some way not good enough (O'Donovan, Rust, & Price, 2015; Sanchez & Dunworth, 2014). Students can take ownership by giving self and peer feedback, attending office hours to ask for clarification related to feedback, and becoming comfortable using the feedback as a learning tool

informing future work rather than as a temporary and disposable experience (Bailey & Garner, 2010).

The first two years of many degree programmes provide the opportunity to create a new environment around assessment and feedback, especially the development of a students' feedback literacy. For many programmes, the marks in the first two years do not count to the overall awarding of the degree providing time and space for students to learn about feedback, to be exposed to a variety of feedback options, and how to build the connections between modules.

The only way this change can occur is if staff are committed to provide a little support and help along the way. This shift in attitude can affect how willing students are to engage with feedback, and how willing they are to create a dialogue around feedback which can then foster a greater development of feedback literacy.

## 6.5 LIMITATIONS

The main limitation to this study is that the data presented is not longitudinal. It is hard to know if students' perception of feedback declines as they move through their programme of study, or if the students in the different years surveyed and interviewed were simply reacting to their feedback experience at that point in their educational journey. This limitation was balanced with interview questions that asked students to speak about their feedback experiences across the whole of the programme, and not just for the year they are currently in. It was further balanced with conversations with staff, to gain a further understanding of whether their feedback practices change for different level modules. While it is not suggested that the results and the

conversations would have been different if the study was conducted over a four year timeframe, it is worth pursuing the notion that the commitment that a programme has to their feedback practices is what will help students take an interest in their feedback literacy, and their engagement with feedback as a learning tool.

## 6.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research in this area could go in a multitude of ways to help further the understanding of what can support a greater feedback literacy for students. As identified in Chapter One, the research around feedback literacy does not discuss what role a programme structure has in supporting the students' development. Longitudinal studies around this would further add to the strength of the recommendations put forth in this study. There is also scope for research on staffs' feedback literacy, and how the promotion, support, and encouragement of staff developing their skills translates to the classroom. This current study demonstrated the importance of staff feedback literacy and staff attitudes on the way students viewed feedback, but more work would need to be done to explore this connection. While this current study aims to fill that gap in the literature, there is more work that needs to be done.

## 6.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND STUDY CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the research questions along with a brief summary of the responses generated by the participating programmes. This study argued that it is not about following rules for 'good' feedback, but about creating an environment where students can learn about and learn from a variety of types of feedback. Students need to learn the purpose of feedback, as well as how to use it to their best advantage in improving not only their work, but also their



overall learning. This chapter has emphasised the importance of a programme-focused approach to feedback, and what that can mean for using feedback as a learning tool and not just a summation of an assignment. This study offered some recommendations that could help create that environment that would support for programmes that wish to balance out the feedback they provide and allow students to take control of their learning. These recommendations are not the only way to help create this environment, but they capture some of the key conceptual and empirical findings in the literature, and hope they stimulate conversation among colleagues about the best ways in which their programmes can achieve a healthy balance and progression.

The methodology utilised in this study is just one method that can be employed. TESTA allows a programme to map assessment and feedback practices for the entirety of the programme. This can help in creating a logical flow of assessment and feedback practices so that students understand how to engage with feedback as a tool to aid in future learning. A space for ongoing dialogue between lecturers, between students and lecturers, and between students and their peers needs to be fostered, to allow for the gradual emergence of feedback literacy amongst a cohort of 'feedback connoisseurs'. Policy in Higher Education is rapidly changing; whilst the pressures towards atomised, fast food education continue to increase, there is growing awareness of the damage this can do to learning and to health, and an emerging 'slow learning' movement (see for example Berg & Seeber, 2013). Now is the time to champion a new environment and culture around feedback, across the whole of a programme that recognises that learning takes time and that celebrates a dialogical route towards feedback – and learning – literacy.

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# **APPENDICES**

# Appendix A: The Assessment Experience Questionnaire

## AEQ (V3.3)

By filling out this questionnaire I understand that I am agreeing to participate in a research study

Please respond to every statement by circling 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; and 5 = strongly disagree to indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement

Programme of Study: ..... Year of Study: .....

Biographical Data: (please tick as appropriate)

Male ..... Female..... Other.....

Age (17 -21.....) (22 -30)..... (31 +.....)

Average achievement on this course: (1<sup>st</sup>.....); (2:1.....); (2:2.....) (3.....)

**Please respond with respect to your experience so far of the programme named above, including all its assessment components**

strongly disagree  
disagree  
neutral

1	I used the feedback I received to go back over what I had done in my work	1	2	3	4	5
2	The feedback I received prompted me to go back over material covered in the course	1	2	3	4	5
3	I received hardly any feedback on my work	1	2	3	4	5
4	You had to study the entire syllabus to do well in the assessment	1	2	3	4	5
5	The assessment system made it possible to be quite selective about what parts of courses you studied	1	2	3	4	5
6	The way the assessment worked you had to put the hours in regularly every week	1	2	3	4	5
7	It was always easy to know the standard of work expected	1	2	3	4	5
8	I paid careful attention to feedback on my work and tried to understand what it was saying	1	2	3	4	5
9	The teachers made it clear from the start what they expected from students	1	2	3	4	5
10	The staff seemed more interested in testing what I had memorised than what I understood	1	2	3	4	5
11	It was possible to be quite strategic about which topics you could afford not to study	1	2	3	4	5
12	It was often hard to discover what was expected of me in this course	1	2	3	4	5
13	On this course it was necessary to work consistently hard to meet the assessment requirements	1	2	3	4	5
14	Too often the staff asked me questions just about facts	1	2	3	4	5
15	I didn't understand some of the feedback on my work	1	2	3	4	5
16	Whatever feedback I received on my work came too late to be useful	1	2	3	4	5
17	The way the assessment worked on this course you had to study every topic	1	2	3	4	5
18	To do well on this course all you really needed was a good memory	1	2	3	4	5
19	I have used feedback provided on my work in one module to help with work in another.	1	2	3	4	5
20	As I have progressed through my course I have become better at using feedback to improve my performance.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>These questions are about the way you go about your learning on the course</b>						
21	When I'm reading I try to memorise important facts which may come in useful later	1	2	3	4	5
22	I usually set out to understand thoroughly the meaning of what I am asked to read	1	2	3	4	5
23	I generally put a lot of effort into trying to understand things which initially seem difficult	1	2	3	4	5
24	I often found myself questioning things that I heard in classes or read in books	1	2	3	4	5

25	I find I have to concentrate on memorising a good deal of what we have to learn	1	2	3	4
26	Often I found I had to study things without having a chance to really understand them	1	2	3	4
<b>Learning from the exam</b> (only to be completed if there were exams on the course)					
27	Doing exams brought things together for me	1	2	3	4
28	I learnt new things while preparing for the exams	1	2	3	4
29	I understood things better as a result of the exams	1	2	3	4
<b>Overall satisfaction</b>					
30	Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course	1	2	3	4

## Appendix B: Focus Group Questions for Students

### Introduction

Thanks, consent forms, introduce yourself.

“I’m interested in understanding how you respond to the way you are assessed – how it affects how much you study, what you study, when you study and how you study. This isn’t an interview – it is what is called a ‘focus group’. I’m hoping we can have an engaging discussion around the central focus of ‘how assessment affects my studying’. I don’t expect you to have immediate answers to my questions or even any ideas in your head at all to start off with – you might not have thought much about this before – but if we discuss this I’m hoping we will help each other to explore this topic by talking to each other and exploring issues about assessment on your degree programme that seem important to you.”

What I’d like to do is tape the discussion so that I have a record. A professional transcriber will listen to the tape and write up a record of the discussion – no-one will be identified by name in the recording, but it would be helpful if you could name yourself every time you speak so that she can distinguish different voices – you can reinvent yourself and use a pseudonym if you like. One other thing, for ethical reasons, it would be good if you don’t name your lecturers directly but refer to them indirectly or by the module etc.

### Prompts to discussion

1. "Tell me about how you are assessed – what assessment on your degree programme consists of".

*This is to define the domain of the focus group and get them thinking in specific terms rather than starting off making generalisations before they have engaged their brains. It is an easy thing for them to start talking about so they don't feel foolish or confused. Get everyone to chip in very early on so a pattern of discussion is established rather than one to ones with you.*

- can you give an example?
- Is that a general feeling – do you all think that?
- Why do you respond like that? Frowning? Smiling?
- keep them to the programme you are interested in
- prompt them to mention all aspects of assessment (especially including feedback, but also the form assignments take, criteria, marking schemes) so that they come to understand what you mean by assessment and by an assessment system or regime.

2. "Tell me about the feedback you receive – what do you think of it?"

- prompt them about what they think feedback – the various forms feedback may take, how they use feedback, what its limitations are, what the point of feedback is, whether they read it when they receive their marks, whether marks are more important than words; how many of them have received oral feedback on work in tutorials, how useful they find whole class feedback, whether they get this? How long it takes to get feedback and whether this has an impact?

3. How does your feedback help you do better across modules?

- a. Do you ever use feedback from one module to help you in another? How?
- b. If no, why not?

4. "Tell me about how the way you are assessed affect your studying – for example determining to some extent what you pay attention to, or leave out, what you spend time on, how much effort you put in, how engaged you are, that kind of thing...."

- prompt them to give specific instances of general ideas they mention – for example if someone says "on some courses you really don't have to do a lot" then find out which course, if there are other courses that are different, how they get to find out that not much is required etc
- if one person mentions something – ask the others if it is the same for them, or the same for most other students
- ask "Why do you respond like that"
- explore if this has changed over time as they have become more experienced as students – over the years
- How consistent is the advice/guidance you are given by lecturers?
- What assessment related factors motivate you to take your optional modules – exams/no exams; lenient markers/fewer assessed pieces etc?

5. "Tell me about how you have come to know what you are supposed to be doing and how you know what is likely to get good marks or to pass or fail?"

- prompt them to give specific instances of general ideas they mention – for example if someone says "I don't really understand what they want half the time" then probe how they DO get to find out, if some courses are clear and others not, or whether the whole thing is a blur, what they would ideally like in terms of clarification, whether what they want differs between courses or years etc.
- how consistent are the messages about assessment – do you always know what is expected or is it a bit of a guessing game? prompt them about how they use criteria, whether they have assessed their own work, or peer assessed, or been shown models of good practice – do they know what quality looks like?



6. Summary and judgements: "Overall, does the way assessment works here help you to learn well, or does it interfere or cause you difficulties."

Prompts can also take the form "I know of courses where xxxx - is it like that here for you?"

## Appendix C: Interview Questions for Programme Leaders

1. What type of student does the programme recruit? (in terms of previous educational experience, tariffs, career aspirations etc.)
2. Can you give me an example of assessment that you do on your course? How do you go about deciding the best way to assess the students?
3. How long does it take from the submission of an assessed task to the return of feedback and marks? What about exams? (Clarify whether feedback and marks arrive simultaneously for the student or are separated by prior or subsequent electronic publication of marks. Check how the system for collection of assessed work operates – whether through the administration team, electronically, or through whole class or one-to-one tutorial systems. Clarify whether certain feedback/marks is returned faster than others – for example presentations. Clarify whether marks and feedback are released as provisional, i.e. before the external examining system kicks in. Clarify and factor in whether formative feedback is returned more quickly than summative feedback. If there are different variables – for example 80% of assessment is written work returned after 21 days, and 20% is presentation, returned within one day, do some sums to work out the overall return factor.)
4. How do you define formative assessment?
5. What do you consider ‘good’ feedback?
6. What are you hoping to get from the data that you are presented?
7. Is there anything that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview? Anything you would like to ask me?

## Appendix D: Interview Questions for Staff

1. How do you go about deciding the best way to assess the students? Can you give me an example of assessment that you use on your module?
2. How do you define formative assessment? Can you give me an example of one you use?
3. What type of feedback do you provide to your students?
4. What do you consider 'good' feedback? Can you give me an example?
5. What are the factors that have an impact on feedback being viewed as good or useful as it might be to students?
6. Do you think that students make connections between the learning that they do in the different modules and in different years? Why or why not?
  - a. If no, what do you think might help make students make the connections in their learning?
7. Is there anything that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview? Anything you would like to ask me?



# Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Edinburgh Napier University

**Researcher(s):** Ms. Kimberly Wilder

**Study Title:** **An Investigation into Programme Level Approaches to Feedback: Influences on Students' Learning and Feedback Literacy**

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## 1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate and any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

## 2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

Students of Edinburgh Napier University who are part of the suite of programmes that have been targeted for support.

## 3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to explore what a programme-focused approach to curriculum design should imply for feedback and assessment.

## 4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The focus groups will all take place at Edinburgh Napier University. The focus groups will last anywhere between 30 and 45 minutes.

## 5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer questions about how you respond to the way you are assessed – how it affects how much you study, what you study, when you study and how you study. You may skip any question (or questions) that you feel uncomfortable answering.

#### 6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?

While you may not see the benefits immediately, your participation in this study will help me gain a better understanding of how students respond to the feedback and assessment that they receive. This will then allow for a larger discussion by the university, and possible changes to the ways in which students are assessed and provided feedback in order to maximise learning and productivity throughout a programme of study.

#### 7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

While participating in this study there are a couple of risks that you should be aware of. There is a possibility that the questions that I am going to ask may make you feel uncomfortable. Again, you may skip those questions. The focus group will be recorded, and because you are giving personal insight and opinions on assessment practices on campus, your responses may be linked to you, or a specific program or lecturer.

#### 8. HOW WILL MY INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your identity. The consent forms with your names on them, as well as the recordings of the focus groups will be stored in a secure location, including any codes to your data. A professional transcriber will listen to the tape and write up a record of the discussion – no-one will be identified by name in the recording, but it would be helpful if you could name yourself every time you speak so that she can distinguish different voices – you can reinvent yourself and use a pseudonym if you like. One other thing, for ethical reasons, it would be good if you don't name your lecturers directly but refer to them indirectly or by the module etc. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed six years after the close of the study. All electronic files containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations. Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

#### 9. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher(s), Kimberly Wilder at [k.wilder@napier.ac.uk](mailto:k.wilder@napier.ac.uk) or by phone at 0131 455 2677.

#### 10. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

#### 11. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?

Edinburgh Napier University does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but the study personnel will assist you in getting treatment should you become injured.

#### 12. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all participants and researchers during the focus group session.

**If you cannot agree to the above stipulation please see the researcher(s) as you may be ineligible to participate in this study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person  
Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: