IMPROVING STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH FEEDBACK:

REPORT ON A PROJECT UNDERTAKEN IN THE FACULTIES OF

ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES AND OF LAW AT UNSW

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INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is one of the largest faculties at UNSW. It employs some 350 staff and teaches 3,893 undergraduate and 1,039 postgraduate students. It offers both generalist and subject specific degree programs: in Arts, Arts (Media and Communications), Music, Social Science, Social Science in Criminology, International Studies, and Social Work. The Faculty of Law at UNSW is one of Australia’s leading law schools. The Faculty has two schools, the Law School and the Australian School of Taxation and a wide range of Research and Community Centres. It employs the equivalent of about 112 full-time academic staff and teaches over 3,000 students.

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law at UNSW both have excellent records so far as the standard of teaching is concerned. One blip in an excellent record is that of student satisfaction with the feedback they receive within a course. Appropriate feedback is a particularly important component of overall student satisfaction with teaching.¹ This project aimed to identify ways of improving student satisfaction with the feedback they were receiving within each course without increasing the amount of staff time allocated to providing that feedback. The project was funded by a grant from the Learning and Teaching Fund awarded to Assoc. Prof. Shirley Scott (FASS) and Prof Andrew Byrnes (Law).

The project was designed and undertaken in two parts. The first part, completed in session 2 2007, addressed several aspects of feedback at the level of the individual course. The second part was undertaken in session 2 2008. Although it began with the goal of confirming the tentative conclusions from Part A, the emphasis in Part B shifted to the bigger picture in terms of learning and teaching policy at the Faculty level.

¹ Paul Ramsden Learning to Teach in Higher Education 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), at 96.
PART A:
IMPROVING STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH FEEDBACK WITHIN A COURSE

Initial Goals and Hypotheses

The literature on evaluation and feedback is voluminous and the essential features of good feedback in the disciplines encompassed by the Faculties of Arts & Social Sciences and of Law are well known. Feedback needs to be timely, to balance positive with negative advice at an appropriate level of detail, and to show why the work received the mark that it did. Policies at UNSW have been designed to reflect such understanding. This project was not designed to go back over all that ground. The issue being addressed was therefore more nuanced than simply improving feedback, as measured by student evaluations. For one thing, the issue was complicated by the fact that anecdotal evidence told us that many teachers disappointed with how students have rated their satisfaction with feedback in a course are particularly conscientious teachers who have put considerable energy into increasing the quantity and quality of feedback provided to students. Members of staff in this situation have been puzzled as to just what it is that they would have to do in order to score really well on the feedback question. This led to one starting hypothesis: that students and staff may not understand the same thing by feedback. Perhaps the extra feedback that teachers have sought to provide has not been what students wanted and/or was not recognized as feedback by the students. To take one simple example, it appears that students do not always understand the formative role that marginal comments are supposed to play. Many students assume, for example, that the number of comments corresponds with the number of errors in the essay but the comments are rarely provided on that basis.

The possibility of a mismatch between what students and staff understand by feedback is enhanced by the issue of technology. This is in part a generational issue. The typical undergraduate student today has grown up with computers and digital technologies, whose communication time is rapid. There is some suggestion in the literature that this has produced a group of students for whom traditional types of feedback – such as written comments at the end of a piece of assessment – are simply too cumbersome and too late to be of relevance. Perhaps on-line forms of feedback will be of more relevance to students: email conversations between staff and students and/or chat rooms and on-line discussions by class members, whether or not moderated by the teacher. The project thus also sought to explore whether Generation Y may have particular feedback needs and/or expectations different from those of previous generations.

Another complicating factor is the fact that the amount of assessment tasks undertaken by students has in most cases decreased over recent years. This is primarily because of higher student to staff ratios. The University moved to a 12-week as opposed to 14-week teaching session in 2008. In some cases there is only one essay required in a course and hence no scope for students to apply what they learnt from one essay to another within the same course. Many students do not collect their assignment work when it is available for return and anecdotal evidence suggests that many students show an interest only in the mark received rather than the constructive feedback provided on the assignment. This gave rise to a third starting hypothesis:
that the feedback already being provided by staff is not always used to good effect by students. This perception naturally mitigates against staff wanting to allocate additional time to providing increased levels of feedback.

Another aspect of the fact that students tend to complete less assessment items per course than previously is that each piece of assessment carries more weight and hence students want to know how they are going in a course ahead of submitting that piece of assessment or sitting that test. In the past, for example, when students may have written two or more essays in a course, the first could be used as a warm-up for the lengthier piece. If the assessment is reduced to one essay, students want to know how they can know if they are on the right track. While summative evaluation is a long-established tradition and academics are comfortable with the objectives of summative evaluation and range of forms of evaluation from which to choose, students consistently tell us that they do not get enough feedback on how they are going before they reach those points at which summative evaluation is conducted. A fourth starting hypothesis or perhaps premise of this project was therefore that we need to find better ways of letting students know how they are progressing ahead of their completing a major piece of work. This correlates closely with an emphasis in the literature on providing ‘feed-forward’ as opposed to only ‘feedback’ to students.

The challenge of improving feedback is sharpened by the nature of the tasks on which feedback must be provided. This is a particular problem in courses in which students may not be ready to undertake the complex research, analytical and writing tasks on which they are assessed until the course is well-advanced and in which marking is time-consuming and class numbers may be relatively high. Most of the assessment tasks undertaken in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences and Law do not have a single correct answer. It is not feasible for students to write multiple research projects in a single course or for staff to assess them. The issue is at its starkest at a postgraduate research level, at which it is not possible for students to write practice theses. Faculties have therefore introduced means of addressing this issue with review and reporting regimes, but the issue remains inadequately addressed at undergraduate and postgraduate coursework levels.

The question of staff time and priorities adds an additional dimension to the issue. Incentives for staff to devote more than a minimum time to teaching have been severely reduced. While there have always been pressures on academics to publish in order to obtain a position and to get promoted, these pressures now permeate the system to a greater extent. Australian universities have in recent years been funded in part on the basis of the quantity of publications of their staff and this is flowing through to the allocation of individual workloads. It would not be difficult to find ways of increasing the amount of feedback to students if academic staff were to devote more time to doing so, but there would have been little point in this report setting out such suggestions and relying on moral pressure to get staff to undertake those changes. The goal of the project was therefore expressed as to improve student satisfaction without increasing the amount of staff time allocated to this activity.
The Context

Part A of the project was undertaken at a time of great change at UNSW as a whole as well as in the relevant faculties. The Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences had just been restructured so as to reduce the number of schools from 12 to 5 and plans were in place to move academic offices so as to ‘co-locate’ staff within the new schools, a new formula for devising workloads had been commissioned from an external consultant, staff had been invited to prepare expressions of interest regarding what would be taught in a restructured BA degree containing fewer majors, a remodelled International Studies degree program was in the processes of being approved, and budgetary constraints had led to reduced administrative support, increased class sizes and pressure to teach courses without any casual tutors. Staff tended to perceive a reduced University support for teaching, reflected in the squeeze placed on employing any casual tutors and the move to require academics to use an on-line teaching evaluation form, to which response rates amongst students were predictably low so that the scores were statistically meaningless. While by no means the only one, the CATEI form had traditionally been a key basis for course improvement as well as an important element in a teaching portfolio for promotion or job application. Additionally, preparations were in train to move from a 14 week to a 12-week teaching session in 2008. Morale amongst academics in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences was low and the scope for fine-tuning what were high standards of teaching was limited.

What Was Done

Due in part to the context in which the project was undertaken, the most feasible means of conducting the project proved to be to run a number of ‘mini-projects’. Volunteer participants were invited to read a prepared document setting out some issues related to feedback, particularly formative feedback, and providing some insights from the educational literature. In the light of their professional experience to date and in discussion with the project leaders, the participants then tested a hypothesis of interest to them. In most cases a change to what was being done in one course was trialled and students were asked to reflect on the value of this change. In some cases student evaluations from previous years were available so that the impact of changes made this session could be compared with student evaluations from previous years, but the CATEI issue made this problematic. This methodology had the advantage that the participants were all motivated and keen to participate. The obvious disadvantage remained the time factor and scope to take time from other activities to devote to the project. More than one mini-project never really got off the ground but something was trialled in some 10 courses. On 19 October, Michele Scoufis, Director, Learning & Teaching @ UNSW assisted me to run a focus group session for staff participants. At this we discussed all the projects that had been undertaken. We had one volunteer student, who gave valuable input.

Participants

The following members of the Faculties of Arts & Social Sciences and of Law made valuable contributions to the project through undertaking a ‘mini project’: Dr Tony Billingsley, Prof. Andrew Byrnes, Ms Karen Heycox, Dr Geoff Levey, Dr Alan
Findings Regarding 'Feed-forward'

Four of the mini-projects addressed ways of increasing the amount of feedback given to students ahead of a major component of the assessment so as not to increase the marking burden for staff. Two key ways were through in-class practice tests/quizzes and through the preparation of an annotated bibliography ahead of writing a research essay. The participants had as a starting point guidance from the literature and from what I had previously trialled. There is a considerable body of literature regarding ways in which formative feedback can contribute to improved performance in summative assessments. Michael Jackson, Neil Duncan, Richard Higgins and others use the term ‘feed-forward’ to describe feedback that contributes to improving student performance in ensuing, summative assessment tasks: 'Perhaps we need to shift the emphasis to “feeding forward” into a piece of work, rather than simply “feeding back” after the assessment is completed.' Formative feedback is most valuable in improving student performance when the feedback is timely, constructive and aligned with learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

Smyth tells us that feed-forward exercises may be compulsory, assessable, or exclusively informative. In deciding which form to use, it should be borne in mind that it is often (only) the high-achieving students who opt for additional support and

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Students often will not complete tasks that are not assessed or do not carry significant assessment weight. If all students are to benefit from feed-forward exercises conducted during class time the exercises therefore need to be conducted during a 'compulsory' section of a course (eg. in Arts this would be in the tutorial rather than the lectures). If this is not the case, incentives may be required for non-assessed exercises to be completed.

Feed-forward may be gained from teachers, peers or through self-assessment exercises. Peer or self-evaluation exercises have less impact on teacher time, are for some students less intimidating than formal assessment, and give students the opportunity to critically engage with their own and their peers’ work. Literature on self- and peer-assessment suggests that 'self-assessment and peer-assessment have a tangible learning pay-off, not least that associated with the quantity and quality of feedback which learners gain about their own performances.' Students should be explicitly advised that the purpose of the exercise/s is to provide feedback that can contribute to their performance in the ensuing assessment tasks.

In general, we found that formative evaluation exercises were welcomed and valued by students. There is little doubt that doing a quiz in class or a practice test is useful for indicating the format of the test, although this actually becomes problematic where students perceive that the quiz is misleading as a guide to the format or standard of the ensuing test. This type of exercise is also useful for giving some sense of the knowledge needed. It is possible that it is also useful for giving feedback

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9 Chris Rust has written that assessment should accompany a realistic workload for students, should be non-threatening and should not provoke anxiety. See Rust, C., ‘The Impact of Assessment on Student Learning: How Can the Research Literature Practically Help to Inform the Development of Departmental Assessment Strategies and Learner-Centred Assessment Practices?’ (2002), 3 Active Learning in Higher Education 145 at 149.
on critical analysis skills but this is more difficult to judge from these mini-projects because there was not such an emphasis on that.

If a practice test or quiz is not going to increase considerably the time commitment of the tutors there needs to be a ready way for students to learn from their work without it being formally marked. The overall conclusion on this matter would seem to be that it is possible to use a feed-forward exercise without every student receiving individual written comments, so long as there are model answers provided and an opportunity for students to discuss those model answers and to ask questions.

It would seem to be that students want feedback on their capacity to do what it is that their mark is to be based on. So, if it is to be a written test, they would like to know how they stand on such a test. Some specifically said that they would like to know how they are going in relation to participation. But doing a debate in class and getting feedback on that is not going to be perceived as feedback if the primary assessment for the course is going to be a written exam or essay. Other ways of providing formative feedback include through the provision and discussion of the marking criteria and of a grid showing the typical characteristics of an assignment receiving each grade.

In terms of essay writing, it may not be possible for students to write a complete practice essay, but it should be possible to separate out at least some of the skills and knowledge required and to do structured tasks along these lines. The mini-project in which students were asked to complete an annotated bibliography ahead of their major research essay was kept manageable in terms of marking load by reducing the word length of the essay. This practice was less appreciated by the most capable students but resulted in a higher overall standard of essays.

It was difficult to get data on whether the students were more satisfied with feedback overall as a result of these exercises. It seemed from one class that there was a slight increase in satisfaction with feedback but the course evaluation instrument is probably not sufficiently sensitive to be confident about the results.

**Mini-Projects on Other Aspects of Feedback**

The remaining mini-projects looked at other aspects of feedback: what it is that students understand by the term, whether they use feedback from one course in subsequent courses, the timing of feedback, and the question of whether Generation Y has different feedback expectations/needs.

Perhaps most interesting in light of the conclusions above, it seems that the majority of students do not automatically deem 'feed-forward exercises' such as class quizzes or annotated bibliographies 'feedback' and will continue to primarily associate the term 'feedback' with written comments on assessment items. As our student volunteer at the focus group session commented:

'Feedback is something that happens after an assessment.'

When asked what it would have taken for them to give a course a higher score on feedback, a significant number responded by saying that the comments (on the
assignment) had been too brief. The comments provided by this lecturer had been limited primarily by the time-intensive nature of the work of writing detailed comments. This raises the possibility that this project may have started with goals that are not realizable. While we sought ways to improve student perceptions that they were getting adequate feedback without increasing the staff time taken to provide that feedback, it may be that this is virtually impossible to do: in the humanities, social sciences, and law, teaching students to think and write critically may necessarily be labour-intensive and it may simply be the case that short-cuts do not work. Practices such as inviting or requiring students to write annotated bibliographies ahead of essay-writing, or submitting two versions of an essay so that formative feedback on the first draft can be put to good effect in the second draft are only feasible where the staff concerned are dealing with relatively small numbers of students or perhaps if they have no responsibilities other than teaching. Gibbs and Simpson note that

Feedback may need to be quite regular, and on relatively small chunks of course content, to be useful. One piece of detailed feedback on an extended essay or design task after ten weeks of study is unlikely to support learning across a whole course very well.11

There was a strong belief on the part of one or two staff participants that student recognition of formative evaluation exercises as forms of feedback could change if staff frequently refer to what they communicate to their students as `feedback', i.e. that we can teach the students to understand feedback in a broader sense if we use the term in that way. We may also need to teach students how to use feedback. Writing on Generation Y suggests that reflective work tends to be one of their weaknesses. Perhaps it would be advisable to specify in our course guides what feedback opportunities will be provided for students and how students can use that information to help them prepare for and/or to do better in the assessment.

Overall, however, it would seem that the CATEI question on feedback may mean different things to different people. Including a brief explanation in the questionnaire of what is really being asked of the students (for example inserting a brief definition of feedback in brackets after the term appears) would be one way of rectifying this but it may not be feasible to change the question because it is apparently aligned to questions asked in the Student Survey and in the CEQ. It has also been left alone year upon year to ensure the data is comparable over the years.

Anecdotal evidence that students pay no attention to the written comments on their work was not confirmed. About nine in ten respondents felt that the comments received did shape their subsequent approach to assignments. Where they do not do so it may well be because they do not see the relevance of feedback on that piece of work for what they will submit in the future, possibly to different markers in different courses. Just as staff have had to becoming increasingly time-efficient and strategic in their allocation of time to the competing demands and expectations on them, so have students.

Explorations of the expectations and needs of the Net Generation suggested that early exposure to, and familiarity with, digital technologies may have implications for how many of these students like to learn. So far as feedback is concerned, it may well be that today’s students have higher expectations regarding service delivery, which heightens the value of the timely return of essays, and suggests that students might value input from peers through discussion groups and so on. Whether they would recognize this as feedback is, again, a separate question.

Conclusions on Part A of the Project

The mini-projects undertaken in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences and of Law reinforce the view that there may well be more leverage to improve teaching through changing aspects of assessment than there is in changing anything else. It was clear that we could not expect the mini-projects undertaken in session 2 2007 to provide the definitive answer to the perennial puzzle regarding student responses to the CATEI question on feedback – of just what it would take in the way of feedback to make them fully satisfied!

The mini-projects on formative evaluation tended to confirm the impression that, while there are many valuable things that could be done to provide students with additional feedback on their progress ahead of a major assessment activity, it is the written comments on an assessment item that remains by far the most important in terms of influencing student perceptions of feedback. The primary reason why markers do not provide more of this is in most cases likely to be because of the time it takes to do so on each essay, multiplied by what is often a considerable volume of work to be marked, and the competing demands on staff time.

PART B: FROM CLASSROOM TO POLICY

In September 2008 I ran four student focus groups to try to move from the tentative findings of Stage 1 of the project to conclusions from which policy implications could be derived. I was ably assisted in the process by Priya Balachandran, a student nearing completion of a Bachelor of Economics/Bachelor of Social Sciences degree.

I decided to recruit undergraduates in their 3rd or subsequent year of a degree program offered by FASS or Law, so that participants could draw on considerable experience, both in terms of courses and of CATEI completions. During the focus group session I interspersed discussion with written responses, so in effect my methodology was part focus group, part survey. Quotes in this report will include both written and verbal comments.

Well over a hundred students responded to the recruitment flyers and email, although the response from FASS was greater than that from Law. This may have been because of the timing of the groups or the methods by which I advertised the groups to the two faculties. Thirty-three students participated, 8 from Law and 25 from FASS. Where students were Arts/Law students, I asked them to answer only on the basis of their experience in Law. The number of students from Law was, though, too small for the findings to be considered representative, and there is scope for any issues raised in relation to feedback in Law to be further explored. I hope that this report may nevertheless suggest possible avenues for further investigation in Law.

Some findings stood out in terms of how widely held the student views were, how strongly held, and/or how significant the issue seemed to be. I have therefore divided my findings into ‘primary’ findings and others. I recognize that there is a level of interpretation involved in my drawing this distinction.

PRIMARY FINDINGS

1. Students understand feedback in broad terms. Feedback on assignments is probably the single most important factor, but students perceive there to be far more to it than this.

The most fundamental thing I wanted to be sure of was what underpins student responses to CATEI question 2: ‘I was given helpful feedback on how I was going in the course’. The tentative conclusion from last year was that students answer this on the basis of comments on assignments, even if they have found other activities useful in terms of learning. When Geoff Levey ran a mini-survey on this issue, Geoff felt that many of the students may have answered the question as if they were evaluating the course in which the survey was given. When given a list of items and asked which contributed to their view of the feedback in a course, I thought that many had answered it simply according to whether they thought the particular things (eg prompt response to emails) was important rather than whether it contributed to their evaluation of feedback.
In the focus group I approached the task as follows:

1. I gave everyone 2 copies of the CATEI Form A and assured them that I was not interested in how they filled in the form or which course they were evaluating.
2. I then asked them to think of a course in which they were currently enrolled and to answer question 2 on one copy.
3. I asked them to think of a course they had already completed and answer question 2 in relation to that course on the other copy.
4. I asked the students to answer in writing, ‘What aspects of the course/s or of your experience in the courses shaped your answer to the question on feedback? In other words, what were you thinking of when you decided how to rate that course?’
5. Most individuals shared one of their points and we had a general discussion.
6. Everyone was then asked to answer, in writing, ‘Is feedback the comments received on assignments or is it much broader?’

At the end of this process, six out of 33 students, or 18%, stated that ‘feedback’ as they understood it when completing CATEI question 2 is only comments on assignments. The rest believed that there was much more to it. Written comments made before discussion (at step 4 as explained above) would seem to bear this out, although if we take the question to include other aspects of assignment return, such as time taken to receive marked work, I would estimate that something like 30% are thinking exclusively or virtually exclusively in terms of their experience with the return of assignments and the rest are thinking more broadly of their experience in the course.

2. Students have had a very mixed experience in terms of feedback

When asked whether they have received sufficient feedback at UNSW, small numbers committed to either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The vast majority reported an extremely varied experience. Students who have been on exchange to other countries reported both better and worse experiences elsewhere.

Students reported that in a minority of cases they have received assignment work back with no comments on it.

Several mentioned dissatisfaction with postgraduate students tutoring. Although some reported very conscientious and competent postgraduate tutors, this seemed to be the minority experience. Some felt that the standard was inadequate and deemed postgraduate students, particularly new ones, ‘unqualified’ to be assessing student work:

‘unqualified staff (e.g. new tutors, recent graduates who are teaching) should not mark assignments or should be given strict guidance and school standards/policies.’

The lack of consistency extends beyond ‘good and bad’ to a perceived lack of consistency in standards of marking. A theme that came through was that different academics are looking for different things and it is difficult for students to know what they are aiming to produce until after the event.
Student: 'A lot of teachers seem to have very different expectations such as for hand-ins. I don’t think I’ve changed my style - I’m not aware of it anyway, but some teachers will say - “yep, that’s great”. They’ll give you great marks and rave about it. And others will go – “that wasn’t what I was after”, and that’s about it. And you never get much of an idea, or you can keep pushing and say “how can I do that better?” or “what’s missing?”… “what does it need?”… But often, when that is after the session is already finished, …

Moderator: 'And then you start again with someone else?’

Student: 'Yes.’

This was perceived to be a particular problem with sessional staff.

'Often the details of what lecturers are looking for in work is not specified or shown by example.’

3. Students believe that good feedback happens where there is already an established relationship/rapport between teacher and student

One clear theme was that good feedback takes place when there is a relationship between teacher and student. i.e. the teacher knows who the student is if they approach them and is able to respond to questions during conversation, through tutorial discussion etc. Students referred to the need to build rapport with staff. A few students mentioned that they find some staff unapproachable.

'I think the Law Faculty is better at the feedback part, because the lecturers definitely make the point to know every student - because we have compulsory participation.’

Student: 'Before they [students] accept to do that course, they’ll see who’s the lecturer. And you could be doing the most ridiculous course you’d never think you’ll like, but if you like that lecturer then you’ll choose it. And I’ve seen people follow lecturers throughout the years, doing courses. And they get to know the lecturer, and choose to be in their tutorial. And that’s kind of a trend I’ve seen with people.’

Moderator: 'So what does that mean?’

Student: 'Well, I guess maybe they [students] feel like they have consistent feedback in what they do, and they like the way the way that they [lecturers] take the course…’

One student even mentioned the body language of the tutor when giving back the assignment as constituting a form of feedback!

4. Students believe that good feedback happens in small classes

Particularly because they saw feedback as occurring during interactions with a staff member, students generally believed good feedback to be a function of the size of the course.

'You don’t get to build a rapport with a tutor if there’s 30 people [in your tutorial].’
'If you want feedback, and you want to say “I don’t really understand why I didn’t go so well on it”, you have to make the effort to contact the lecturer and then arrange a time with them. And talking about class sizes, that’s often difficult. I’m a music student, and they may have like 30 or 40 kids doing that same subject and they don’t have time to see every one of us doing that.’

Several students said that they had not usually received sufficient feedback in first year courses but that it had improved in upper level courses.

There was only one exception. One student, based on their experience in one course, argued strongly that it is possible to receive adequate feedback in a large course if the course has been well designed.

5. Students are generally not comfortable with attending consultation times

Priya and I were both particularly struck by the fact that students do not seem comfortable with approaching staff, in large part because they don’t know what the ‘rules’ are regarding this. One student mentioned that there is a specific Anglo-Saxon culture regarding feedback:

’Culturally, in Australia and most Anglo-Saxon countries, students are encouraged to choose their own paths, and pursue their own academic goals. So, the lecturers aren’t going to chase you up if you don’t bring it up … But I feel that when you do ask for feedback, they generally respond quite well, and in fact they are quite interested to see that you actually paying attention to what they are saying. And I think this differs to other places where I’ve studied. In China and France, where the culture is that lecturers do sort-of try and spoon-feed you, even if you aren’t really interested, they still give you feedback and tell you how you’re going.’

It may be just the ‘pushy’ students who receive adequate feedback:

Law student: ‘I am generally quite persistent when I want feedback. I feel that when you are persistent, then the lecturers do give you the feedback.’

Law student: ‘For example, if they wrote only about the positive aspects of what I’ve written, or only about the negative aspects, I go up to them and say: “can you please give me some more feedback, because I don’t think this is enough” and “I don’t really understand what you are saying” or “your writing is very illegible, so please tell me more”.’

Some students felt that set consultation times are not useful because a problem can crop up at any time and it is very unlikely that they will be able to attend at the set consultation time.

’Most students don’t go to consultation’

’The rigidity of consultation hours (of having to make appointments) makes it unattractive to see lecturers. We’d like to just drop by their office.’
‘Very few lecturers are flexible to our needs to see us when we are available’

The ideal from the student perspective would seem to be that staff are always available, sitting in their offices and waiting for students to drop by when it suits the schedule of the student:

‘[I received my] best results while studying on exchange- [the] professors [were] always available’

6. Students perceive staff as assessing so as to get a final result for each student but students assume that the point of feedback is for them to improve their work

Students have a sense that staff want to assess because they have to generate a result for each student, whereas students want to get the feedback so that they can learn for next time.

When asked ‘Would you have received higher results with more feedback?’ 79% said that they would have received higher results with more feedback. The remaining students answered ‘maybe’.

Students reported that, in order to use feedback to improve their performance within a course, they need:

a) A short turn-around on assignments, the shorter the better. Students reported that the turn-around is in some instances more than 3 weeks. One student recalled an exemplary situation:

Law student: ‘We did an exam on Monday. It was back on the Thursday, and she had to mark something like 200 papers. …[S]he was saying how important giving feedback immediately was, because otherwise you forget about what you’ve done for the assessment….’

Several students liked the idea of feedback being emailed so they could get it in time to make use of it. Some have experienced feedback by email and said it was very useful.

‘We received email feedback on an essay for an assignment- the lecturer went through the assignment (electronic submission) and wrote comments on every single paragraph. This was impressive!’

Emailed comments have the added bonus that they are legible.

b) Students want to know what they did well in addition to what they didn’t do well and what, in practical terms, they can do about it. Several used the word ‘balance’ – they would like to get a balanced appraisal of their work:

‘I thought of essays which were marked and handed back; a lot of the time there was only negative feedback or “areas for improvement” or a positive comment, but very rarely both.’
'[You are] not always told why you are doing well, just that you are: it’s assumed you know, but [we] need feedback regardless of whether it’s good or bad.'

c) Students need the comments to be very specific.

'The kind of feedback the lecturer or marker writes is normally pretty vague-like “you’re not articulating yourself very well”, which every lecturer including you have [told me]… It doesn’t give the examples on how to improve.'

d) Students need a course to be designed so that what they learn on one assessment item can be used to good effect in the next one within the same course. I found this striking because, as the amount of assessment has lessened, many courses have retained differing forms of assessment within a course, addressing different sets of knowledge and skills so as not to discriminate against those whose strength is not in one form of assessment or skill area and to reflect different sections of the course. But a case could be made for streamlining the objectives of each course and paying more attention to the development of a very specific set of skills and knowledge.

e) Timing: If students are to use feedback to improve their performance within the same course they need to get that feedback sufficiently early in the session to make use of that information. Many said that this problem had been exacerbated by the shorter session.

'It is now week 8 and for half of my courses I have yet to receive any feedback at all, so this is therefore hard for me to work out how I am going, grasping course concepts etc.’

'I had one subject last year [in which] everyone - pretty much half the class - quit the subject half way through, just before the assignment was due, because we had no idea what we were supposed to do on the assignment.’

Students are dissatisfied with a heavily weighted final assessment on which they find it difficult to get meaningful feedback. This relates to point 6 above. If staff are assessing to give a result, it is fine to place greatest emphasis on work submitted near the end of session – indeed it is that work which will seem to best represent what the students have learnt in the course, but this may also minimise scope for students to improve on their performance.

Students don’t like the system of having to submit envelopes to get their work back and have found that the system has often failed them. Nor do they like waiting until the next session because by then they have lost interest. They think it poor if they don’t get feedback on the final piece of work, particularly when it is worth a significant weighting and particularly if the result is a nasty surprise. Students acknowledge that only a minority of students want feedback once they have their final result. One student suggested the idea of a day for ’drop in’ after the end of session, to collect their work and discuss if they want to.
OTHER CONCLUSIONS

1) Students would like to receive feedback on each skill/activity on which they are going to be assessed and are unhappy with being assessed on participation in large tutorials.

Law student: ‘I never thought that the assessments reflected what we did for the fourteen weeks. The lecture is about what the case is about, the readings are about what the case is about, and all of a sudden in the exam, you have to give your professional opinion based on a hypothetical case. Having never practised that, or never been shown how to do that for fourteen weeks, I thought that was pretty ridiculous.’

Students are very sceptical regarding the validity of tutorial participation marks, particularly in large tutorials and particularly when the students know that the tutor does not know their names and does not keep a record of discussions. Students also do not think it is fair to receive a result at the end but no feedback on their participation performance during the session:

‘It comes down to 35-40%, which in Arts, is your group or individual presentation plus tutorial participation, so there’s that kind of a total mystery of what you’re going to get for those marks. So I think that, especially if you’re going to be sitting there with 25 other people in class you need to get feedback as to if you are participating enough.’

2. Students would prefer to have a better idea of what they are trying to do before attempting an assessment task than to find out through feedback after the event.

There was virtually unanimous support for the proposition that, particularly at first and second year levels, it would be beneficial if teachers were to find ways of providing informal feedback by which students could gauge their progress ahead of major assessment items. Eg. a quiz in tutorials with model answers provided.

More than one student welcomed the practice of some staff of discussing common pitfalls or what students had done poorly or well last time as a way of trying to help current students avoid the same mistakes. They regarded this as advance feedback:

Law student: ‘I also liked it when the lecturer comments on how the last year or the last session performed on the assessment before she gives the assessment out, and so then that way she can tell us what she’ll look for and stuff. So, if she does that … we can kind of get advanced feedback…’

Law student: ‘For one of our subjects, the teacher gave us three sample assignments, each graded at a C, D and HD level, and the marking grid attached to each of these assignments. This showed us what we had to do (in our assessment) to receive a C grade, a D grade or a HD grade, and how we’d have to go about it.’
3) Students wouldn’t want everything to be standardized: they don’t like the idea that efforts to improve feedback via Faculty policy might mean that every staff member were required to have to go about feedback in the same way or to be monitored.

There was an emphasis on personalised feedback on assignments. Students have strong and extremely contrasting views regarding the value of a marking grid and very few would want standardised grids. One drew a comparison between a marking grid and a scorecard in golf. The scorecard has its place but on its own does not provide adequate feedback:

'I don’t find it [a marking grid] useful… if you are going to play for a golf club, …you really need to go to a coach [for] feedback … directly on what you are trying. Skill development has to be interactive.’

Law student: ‘it’s absolute rubbish that criteria. And most of the lecturers don’t pay any attention to it. … They [the lecturers] get a feeling of how the essay is and then they fill in the boxes accordingly. And that’s fair enough, ‘cos those things are rubbish. But what really helps us when they actually say their reasons in the next paragraphs.’

Law student: ‘I think that having a generic marking grid for all the courses in Law would be fantastic, … I think if you tailor that grid, that’d be nice.”

4) Particularly in large courses, adequate feedback needs to be explicitly built in through course design rather than be dependent on the individual teaching the course.

‘The best way to raise quality is by designing it into the products in the first place.’

Law student: ‘We get a course outline which is very specific - what exactly we’ll be covering in each class, what the reading materials are, and then in one class it’s going to be something like “going through mid-semester exam”, and then another one’s about “assignment discussion”.’

5) Quality feedback, particularly on skills development, is believed vital at first year level so that students can adjust to university.

‘First year students are very unsure of how marking works and generally have less of an idea of what’s expected.’
PART C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FASS

I do not feel that I am in a position to make recommendations for the Law Faculty but I would be happy to work further with staff and students in Law. Here are some recommendations for FASS:

1) FASS must review its commitment to teaching, it being understood that good teaching – inclusive of feedback as opposed to assessing only to determine a mark or grade - is intensive of staff time. If the Faculty renews its commitment to quality teaching, Faculty leaders should then determine how that commitment can be operationalized and reconciled with the current emphasis on research productivity.

There are many dedicated and wonderful teachers in FASS, but a considerable proportion of students articulated what they perceive to have been a shift in emphasis within the Faculty towards research output at the expense of good teaching. If FASS is still dedicated to quality teaching, how is that being operationalized? Is our commitment to high standards of teaching any more than rhetoric? Have we ‘head-hunted’ as many people for their teaching skills and commitment as we have staff for their research? Are administrative decisions taken with pedagogy in mind? Has teaching been a focus in interviews for new staff? Has ongoing teacher skill development been built into our workload model? Is as much emphasis being placed on the development of early career teachers as on the development of early career researchers? How do Heads of Schools balance good teaching practice with the ‘bottom line’ in their decision-making and what incentives are there to do so? Do Faculty leaders want academic staff to ‘go the extra mile’ in their teaching if this reduces research time or would they prefer staff to ‘cut corners’ where it is possible to do so? Is it feasible to retain a commitment to high teaching standards across the board?

2) The efforts that have been directed towards rewarding our best teachers should now be balanced by efforts to ensure that every tutor and every member of the teaching staff is competent and committed to doing a good job.

The University has good teaching awards and there are now teaching awards at a Faculty level, and yet the wonderful work of our ‘star’ teachers can be more than negated in the minds of some students by a few lazy or incompetent teachers. Students believe that the Faculty should ensure that all teaching staff have the necessary expertise – and incentives - to do their job well.

Employment of sessional staff should not be thought of as an ‘easy option’. Too often contracts for sessional staff are organised at the last minute. Some of these sessional staff have no qualifications in education and they may have little experience in teaching, yet these same staff are at the ‘front line’ when it comes to the delivery of our courses. Sometimes it works out well; sometimes it does not. If reliance is to be made on sessional staff, those staff should be either trained, or at a minimum, mentored and guided and their work overseen, at least in their first session. This is very intensive of staff time.
While recognizing that sessional staff are by definition not employed on an ongoing basis, it may be beneficial to find ways of promoting some continuity in the employment of sessional staff who have proven to be competent and dedicated. If tutors have no investment in the success of a course, a teaching program, or the Faculty, it is unrealistic to think that they will seek out opportunities to improve their teaching skills or go beyond the minimum when it comes to providing feedback to students.

3) FASS should review and then be more explicit to students about the ‘culture’ of staff availability for consultation: what should students expect, what is expected of them, and what is the expectation of staff?

I suggest that we need to ‘restructure’ traditional expectations to fit in with changed technology and increased emphasis on staff research. Research active staff cannot be expected to sit around all week waiting for students to ‘drop by’, and students don’t like set consultation hours. Emails are part of the answer but students don’t see them as replacing face-to-face discussion and staff coordinating large courses can easily become overwhelmed with the volume of email enquiries from students. If it is the student’s responsibility to seek feedback, students would like this to be made more explicit. Almost all students agreed that they don’t know how to approach their lecturers to get useful feedback and that they don’t like approaching a staff member for help if that staff member is not going to recognize them when they do so.

4) Despite the move to larger courses, ways need to be found by which first-year students can work closely with staff in relatively small groups, focusing on skill development.

Students believe that much of the most valuable feedback is of the informal and verbal kind, naturally occurring where there is discussion between staff and students who have got to know each other. It would not be an exaggeration to say that students have a ‘hunger’ to develop rapport with their teachers. This is particularly so early in the university experience. Small first year tutorials would seem to be the most obvious way of providing this experience. Teaching of skills at first year level needs to be explicit and regular feedback on progress is likely to facilitate the transition to university.

5) Information on feedback needs to be explicitly built into course design and course guides

I suggest that course guides need to make statements about feedback. A small number of students said that they never read course guides but inclusion of this information will at a minimum ensure that the course designer has given the issue some attention.

The basic questions are:

What is there built into the structure of the course to ensure that a keen student can improve their performance as the course progresses?

Will the feedback to be obtained on the first assessment item help a student perform better on subsequent assessment items? If not, are there valid
educational reasons for this? If so, how should a student go about making best use of the feedback?

6) Some of the most basic aspects of ‘good feedback’ are not happening in all courses in FASS and this needs to be addressed if we are to meet student expectations. In doing so, focus should be on staff having the necessary skills and motivation to teach well. Teaching staff should retain a high degree of autonomy in how they go about their work.

There seems to be a certain proportion of assignments returned with no comments or illegible writing, assignments returned after more than three weeks, and in some cases not returned at all. Students would appear to value diversity in course design and teaching methods and believe that academics should have the final say over the teaching of their courses. Students do not consider addressing questions of quality teaching through standardizing, centralizing or monitoring staff appropriate. By the same token, they don’t want work returned without adequate feedback. The students emphasised appropriate training for staff rather than any form of monitoring.

7) Focus group sessions with our students on particular aspects of teaching and learning could usefully be conducted more often and the findings used to review policy.

Several students commented on how much they appreciated the ‘University’ seeking their opinion and being prepared to reimburse them for the time taken in telling of their experiences and sharing their opinions. A small minority expressed cynicism at the Faculty/University appearing to downgrade to such a significant degree the priority given to teaching overall and then taking the trouble to seek their views on one particular aspect of teaching. They thought it would generally be more effective to put any available resources into reducing class sizes.