Do students perceptions of the purpose and use of feedback change between year 1, 2 and 3 of a programme? A comparative study.

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Abstract

This study investigated how students on a BSc (Hons) Podiatry programme perceived the purpose of feedback and how this feedback was used. A focus group was used initially to explore students' views of feedback. The views and opinions which emerged from the focus group discussion were incorporated into the design of a questionnaire which was given to all students on the programme.

The findings from this study suggest that students perceive the purpose of feedback differently depending on the year of study. There is also evidence that students use feedback received differently as they progress through the programme. The data suggests that there is a transition from students using feedback passively to gauge how well they are doing in the early stages of the programme, to adopting an active approach in the later stages of the programme.

Question/challenge

Published research has focused on assessment feedback (Race 2001, Petty 2004 and Weaver 2006), however research focused on what students consider the purpose of feedback to be and how they respond to that feedback is scarce. Research has questioned student's interpretation of feedback on assessment and suggests that barriers outside of the students control may prevent the use of that feedback (Higgins et al 2002). Higgins et al (2002) concludes that 21% of university students studying business and humanities did not understand partly (19.5%) or at all (1.6%) the feedback they received and 1 in 10 students considered that feedback had not helped to improve academic performance later in the course. The research questions to be investigated in this study focus on what students’ consider the purpose of feedback to be and how feedback is used. A central question for the study is whether differences exist over the course of a programme of study. It is thought
that developmental changes occur over the duration of a degree programme as students develop skill in self-regulated learning together with changes in cognitive thinking skills. Do these changes influence how students utilise feedback and in turn how students use feedback to influence learning? Through analysis of data collected it is anticipated that differences in students’ perception and use of feedback over the 3 years of the programme can be determined. The findings from the study may lead to improved understanding of how to provide feedback to students which enables improvement in practice and enables the teaching team to provide specific and appropriate feedback relevant to the level of study on undergraduate programmes.

Literature review

Evidence suggests that feedback which is ‘helpful’ (Gibbs and Simpson 2004 p10) or ‘appropriate’ (Weaver 2006 p382) plays a role in assisting students’ learning. However what is meant by appropriate or helpful feedback is not clearly defined. Van de Ridder et al (2008 p195) proposed a research based operational definition of feedback in clinical education as ‘specific information about a comparison between a trainee’s observed performance and a standard, given with the intention to improve the trainee’s performance’. Archer (2010) contends that feedback in health care settings often remains an educator driven one way process. It has been suggested that it is difficult to balance the need to be honest and accurate in the interests of patient safety and adversely affecting student self-esteem (Archer 2010). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick in 2006 suggested key principles for effective feedback which were drawn on by Nicholson et al (2008) to suggest that effective feedback facilitates reflection, clarifies what good performance is, provides the opportunity to close the gap between current and desired performance and provides information for teachers that can be used to shape teaching. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggest that students are most likely to act on feedback to improve future work if it is frequent, timely, detailed enough, understandable by the student and focused on the learning rather than the mark.
Feedback has been recognised as being important for learning and different from teaching in that it provides information about performance and can give indications for improvement and can therefore have an impact on the learner’s development. Within clinical education feedback is reported as being crucial in learning situations (Rolfe 2002, Hattie and Timperley 2007, Bailles et al 2009). Programmes of study that involve the development of both clinical and academic skills generally provide students with varied and detailed feedback throughout the different stages of their education. Within medical education the literature suggests that students perceive the feedback given as insufficient particularly within clinical settings (Dudek 2005, van der Ridder 2008). This view is evident in the 2005 report by Sender-Liberman et al which concluded that whilst 90% of surgeons considered feedback had been given successfully only 17% of the students agreed. Following a systematic review of literature Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggest that feedback provides information on the students learning and performance and may provide suggestions for improvements. Furthermore the review determined that feedback was ranked in the top five of influences on learner achievement, with studies showing the highest effect sizes involved students receiving information on a task including ways to do it more effectively. In contrast lower effect sizes were related to praise and punishment. Whilst research suggests many factors influence the impact of feedback there is also the suggestion that feedback is an underused strategy in improving student performance (Sargeant et al 2008, Archer 2010).

Black and Wiliam (1998) discuss what makes for effective feedback from teachers, such as opportunity for students to express their understanding, classroom dialogue that focuses on exploring understanding, and feedback which includes guidance on how to improve. Coleman et al (2006) suggest peer-group and student self-assessment both have the potential to generate instantaneous feedback to enhance students' general understanding of desired performance. Areas for criticism which may arise are outlined by Race (2001) and include the student knowledge base, expert witness feedback, reliability issues and unconvinced external examiners. However, the work of Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000)
demonstrated that peer assessment could be as reliable as that of lecturers and led to a higher degree of student motivation; this was also observed in the study by Mills and Glover (2006). The deeper learning achieved by students who engage in peer and self-assessment has been shown to improve subsequent assessment performance (Coleman et al 2006, Mills and Glover 2006).

**Project Aims**
To establish what students consider the purpose of feedback to be.

To determine how students use feedback received.

To explore if differences in the purpose and use of feedback relate to the year of study within an undergraduate programme.

**Methodology**
The investigation was guided by the perspective that changes in how students approach learning may occur over the duration of a programme. These changes may influence how feedback is perceived and utilised to influence learning. A mixed methods approach utilising qualitative and quantitative data was adopted. In line with Morgan (2007) this approach enables the qualitative and quantitative methods to inform each other and enhance the validity of the data. The qualitative data collection used a focus group at the beginning of the study to explore students’ views on feedback. The quantitative data collection used a questionnaire designed using the results/views emerging from the focus groups. The questionnaire was sent to all students on the programme to further explore the students’ perspectives and provide data to determine the extent to which the perceptions of the focus group represent and reflect the broadly held perspectives of the student body. This research will be based on the premise that feedback is formative i.e. that it informs and guides development, learning and improvement.
**Ethical issues**
Ethical approval was granted from the institutions ethics committee for the use of students in the research. See appendix 1 for copy ethics application.

**Participants**
The study was conducted in semester 1 of an academic year. The participants were drawn from a three year BSc (Hons) Podiatry programme. This programme of study integrates workplace clinical practice with academic study to honours degree level. Exposure to clinical practice begins in year one with one day per week spent in a clinical environment and this increases over the course of the programme to two days per week in year three.

**Focus group**
The focus group was selected using a purposive sample of 12 participants (4 participants from each year of the programme). The focus group was made up of 3 males and 9 females which is a reflection of the 3:1 female to male population ratio on the programme. Initial open ended questions to explore students’ experiences and views of feedback were used with follow-up questions to elicit more in-depth information. Examples of questions included: When do you like to receive feedback? Can you give examples of when you have acted on feedback? See appendix 2 for a list of questions used in the focus group.

The focus group was recorded to facilitate transcription and analysis at a later date. Transcripts from the focus group were coded to ensure that students' identities were protected. (Year 1 participant’s comments are indicated by the prefix L4; year 2 by L5 and year 3 by L6). The responses were considered not only in terms of the students experience but also the context and interpretation of the responses (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000). During the analysis the fact that the data was from a cross section of students on the programme was considered. Therefore emerging views needed to be reviewed for any patterns of difference related to year of study on the programme. Views and opinions that
emerged from the discussion were used to help design a final questionnaire which was sent to all the students on the programme (except those participating in the focus group).

Focus group results
The purpose of feedback
There was variation between the year of study and the opinions expressed by the participants. The results are displayed in Table 1 below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Views/opinions expresses</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you think the purpose of feedback is?</td>
<td>How to pass a module/assignment/how to correct things</td>
<td>L4/1/3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Better mark/improve marks/study direction/knowledge</td>
<td>L4/2/3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tells you what your good at/where to improve/gauge progress/where you stand/level you are at/provide certainty /to give you aims</td>
<td>L4/1/4/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do something different to improve/develop/better understanding of subject matter</td>
<td>L5/2/3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss/talk about progress/how you’re doing/improvement/evaluate</td>
<td>L6/1/3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect to change practice/revision strategy/work/appraise/gives insight/raise awareness</td>
<td>L5/2/3/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Focus group responses to focus group question 1
Views related to the information feedback should convey included:

‘…what you need to do to pass…’ (3/12)
‘…how to get a better mark…’ (4/12)

This suggests an expectation of being told what to do to make an improvement in learning.

This type of response was mainly evident from year 1 participants. Other opinions included

‘…to give you a chance to discuss how well you are doing…’ (6 /12)

This suggests a judgement of performance which is a two way process. This type of response was common from the year 2 and 3 students. The emphasis from the year 3 students’ responses suggests the purpose of feedback was to enable reflection, or to gain insight.
From the responses no clear consensus of the purpose of feedback could be determined. However, the majority of responses indicate that following feedback there would be an action by the student.

**Timing and mechanisms of feedback**

Table 2 display the responses to questions related to the timing and mechanisms of feedback.

| Thinking about feedback, how do you prefer to receive feedback? How could feedback be readily available or more easily used? | Face to face/verbally | Written on assignments | Both verbal and written | After assignments/exam | Continuously /to plan ahead | Mentoring sessions | Before next assignment | More frequently | In private | If fail exam/assignment | Soon after event |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Face to face/verbally | L4/3 L5/4 |
| Written on assignments | L5/2 L6/1/2/3/4 |
| Both verbal and written | L6/1/2/4 |
| After assignments/exam | L4/1/2/3/4 L5/1/3 |
| Continuously /to plan ahead | L6/2/3/4 |
| Mentoring sessions | L5/4 L6/1/2/3 |
| Before next assignment | L5/2/3/4 L6/1/3/4 |
| More frequently | L5/1/2/3/4 L6/2/3/4 |
| In private | L4/3 L5/3/4 L5/1/4 |
| If fail exam/assignment | L4/3/4 L5/1/3 |
| Soon after event | L5/1/3/4 |

**Table 2 Focus group responses to question 2, 3, 4**

Participants emphasised an expectation of a quick turnaround of feedback on marked work and suggested that there should be ‘comments on how you have gone wrong’ or ‘examples of what to do to make it better’ but that quite often the feedback was ‘about spelling and grammar’. Some participants (4/12) expressed concern that for some modules ‘you just get a mark’ or that ‘if it is after submission it’s not helpful’ (3/12) with some agreement that ‘it’s too late to change it then’ (3/12) which suggests a need for formative feedback with 6/12 suggesting feedback ‘before the next assignment’.

The views arising from this section of the focus group discussion are represented in questions 5 and 6 in the final questionnaire to provide quantitative data.

**The impact and benefit of feedback on students**

Table 3 display the responses to questions related to the impact of feedback on students, what they would like to change about receiving feedback and how they use feedback.

All participants agreed that ‘feedback on group work does not generally help with assignments’ especially if the feedback is given by other students as ‘they do not really know what is expected’ (6/12). Participants generally agreed that feedback on clinic should be
given frequently but that if feedback was about ‘something you had done wrong’ the feedback should be given ‘face to face’ ‘in private’. Participants in general agreed that feedback in clinic was being used to improve performance. The desire for frequent feedback echoes responses related to the timing of feedback.

| What are your views on receiving feedback and its impact on you? | Helps you pass exams | L4/2/3/4 |
| | makes you reflect on how you work | L5/3 |
| | be more critical of your work | L5/1/2 |
| | change the way doing a task | L4/3 L5/1/3 |
| | if you can’t understand the feedback then it does not seem constructive | L4/2/3 |
| | It is developmental | L5/1/2 L6/3/4 |
| | It lowers self confidence | L5/4 |
| | motivates me to work harder | L5/3 L6/1/2 |

| In what circumstances do you think feedback is the most beneficial? | in clinic | L4/3 L5/4 L6/1/2/3/4 |
| | if it tells me how to improve | L5/2 L6/1/2/3/4 |
| | from placement | L5/2/3/4 L6/1/2/4 |
| | on assessed work /on exams /on assignments | L4/1/2/3/4 L5/3 |
| | Not on class/group work/not off other students | L4/1/2/3/4 L5/1/2/3/4 L6/1/2/4 |

| What would you want to change about the feedback you receive? | More structured | L4/3 L5/4 |
| | more regular/officially twice a year/quicker | L5/2 L6/1/2/3/4 |
| | More detail/opportunity to ask questions | L5/1/2 |
| | regardless of whether you pass or fail | L4/1/2/3/4 L5/1/3 |
| | on a personal level | L6/2/3/4 |

**Table 3 Focus group responses to question 5, 6, 7**

**Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was designed to explore the views/opinions expressed by the focus group and to determine the extent to which they represented the more widely held views of the study population. The questionnaire utilised both closed and open ended questions which consisted of 4 open ended questions to gather qualitative data regarding individual experiences of feedback and how it was being used. Each question was followed by space for free text response by the participants. A key finding from the focus group identified no consensus from the participants on the purpose of feedback. This led to the opening question (Q1) in the questionnaire. See table 4.
Quantitative data from Likert-scale type questions was used to explore the specific opinions of the focus group in questions 5 and 6 of the questionnaire. Participants were requested to respond by identifying the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements. See appendix 3 for a copy of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed using Survey Monkey. This is a web based programme with the facility to design, distribute and collect surveys. The questionnaire was distributed to all students (n = 70) except those that had participated in the focus group, via the college email system with a link to the survey embedded in the email. This provided the opportunity for students to complete and return the questionnaire anonymously.

**Questionnaire Results**
Descriptive data collected from those participants responding to the questionnaire is displayed in table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number invited to participate</th>
<th>Total responses</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographics of respondents**
Data gathered from participants responding to the questionnaire show there are similar numbers of male to females. There are also a similar number of participants in the age 17 – 21 age range in each year group. However in the year 1 group there are more participants

| Q1 | What do you consider the purpose of feedback to be? |
| Q2 | How and when do you prefer to receive feedback? |
| Q3 | Can you give an example of when you have acted on feedback and why? |
| Q4 | In what circumstances do you think feedback if the most beneficial? |
in the 22-30 age group and less participants in the over 31 years age group. See Figure 1

![Figure 1 Demographic data of participants in year groups](image)

**Data Analysis**

**What do you consider the purpose of feedback to be?**
The majority of responses to this question revealed that students considered the purpose of feedback was to develop academic or clinical performance. Example responses to this open ended question on the questionnaire included: ‘means of gaining knowledge’; ‘improve practice and understanding’; ‘give you aims’. Responses from year 1 students indicated students appeared to be seeking confirmation that the required standard was being met:

‘… to let me know how well I am doing…” (L4/20)

‘… allow the student to know where they stand in their studies/skills…” (L4/18)

‘…to let students know what they are good at…” (L4/14)

These responses suggest a passive approach with students expecting to be told if they are doing well and suggests that students want to receive positive feedback regarding performance and reassurance that they are on the right track. This is in contrast to the responses from students in year 3 in which there appears to be a more active approach. The
year 3 students appear to be guided by feedback to adjust their learning style and inform personal development:

‘….to enable a student to identify areas to correct and improve…’ (L6/10)

‘….purpose of feedback is so we can reflect on performance…’ (L6/15)

‘…makes you reflect on how you work and be more critical of your work…’ (L6/6)

‘…following feedback I revisited academic information and was more able in developing a patient treatment plan…’ (L6/13)

**What feedback should be given?**
The majority of participants agreed that feedback should be provided on all assessed work (Year 1 80%; Year 2 100%; Year 3 100%) and all students agreed that feedback should tell them how to improve. This is in line with the findings of the literature review particularly those from the systematic review of Hattie and Timperley in 2007. There appears to be a consensus across the year groups in this view. See table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 5</th>
<th>% positive responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback should be provided on all assessed work</td>
<td>Y1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would find it useful if other students commented on an assignment draft</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback should tell me how to improve</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be happy to receive written feedback only</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the most important part of feedback is the mark/grade</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be happy with a mark and no other feedback</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be happy with only oral feedback</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6 Percentage of positive responses to question 5**

Most students (80% of year 1 and 3 and 70% of year 2) agree that feedback on clinic performance is either very useful or extremely useful. See figure 2.
Only 40% of students in year 1 agree that feedback on assignments is useful. This may reflect the methods of assessment being used in year 1 which are predominately exams. In year 2 80% of students agree that feedback on placement is useful compared to 40% in year 1 and 30% in year 3. This emphasis on feedback from placement may reflect the students undertaking a practical placement in year 2 in contrast to observational placements in year 1 and 3. This area of feedback may warrant further investigation to clarify the reasons for the difference. There is a steady increase in agreement that feedback on group work is useful as students progress through the programme, however, at year 3 only 40% of students view this as useful. The findings reflect the views expressed in the focus group and are in contrast to recent research promoting self and peer assessment as an area of good practice (Coleman et al 2006, Mills and Glover 2006).

Student comments give an insight into whether feedback should be written or verbal:

‘....I think that every clinical practice session should include a 30 minute feedback session at the end of the day...' (L4/11)

‘....I would prefer written feedback...' (L4/16)

‘....face to face....' (L5/17)
When feedback should be given?
The emphasis placed on feedback related to exams by year 1 students is evident on comments made relating to when feedback should be given:

‘....any time I have to resit an exam....’ (L4/22)

‘...when fail at the exams...' (L4/10)

‘....soon after marks have been received...' (L4/9)

In comparison the year 2 and 3 comments place an emphasis on wanting more frequent feedback. The comments also suggest a desire for formative feedback prior to assessment and to improve practical skills related to clinical practice:

‘....before an assessment...' (L5/14)

‘....receive feedback for some of the written assessments...' (L5/6)

‘...to receive feedback quicker....' (L6/5)

‘...and if there is a way of improving a technique or if I am doing something wrong....’ (L6/15)

‘...at the end of every clinic session...just to have some more of it....' (L6/14)

‘....feedback is feedback....all I want is more of it...’ (L6/6)

These comments, particularly for year 2, are supported by the responses to question 6 (I receive hardly any feedback on my work and whatever feedback I received came too late to be useful) to which 81% and 73% respectively either agreed or strongly agreed. See Table 7
Responses to question 6 (I didn’t understand some of the feedback on my work) indicate that 42% of year 2 students and 17% of year 1 and 3 students do not always understand the feedback given (see Table 2). In addition student responses to the question I paid careful attention to feedback on my work and tried to understand what it was saying (see Table 2) indicate that 37% of year 1, 54% of year 2 and 83% of year 3 agree with the statement. This suggests that year 2 students are making an effort to understand the feedback given but not succeeding. This contrasts with 83% of year 3 students trying to understand with 17% not succeeding. This highlights an area of concern. If students cannot understand the feedback given it could be surmised that they would be unable to improve their learning or practice.

This is reflected in some of the comments made by students which indicate the desire for clarification:

‘....More detail-and the opportunity to ask questions...’ (L5/9)

‘....I acted on feedback in year 2, but it was written feedback not verbal. I misunderstood the feedback and made my poster worse’ (L6/9)

‘.....I would prefer written feedback but would also like to be able to talk about it with someone if I don’t understand it....’ (L4/16)

There is an indication that written feedback may not be understood and suggests that students were not being provided with an opportunity to ask questions. This area warrants further investigation to clarify the nature of this misunderstanding. Comments from students
indicate that timeliness and insufficient detail were issues in the previous year of study for the year 2 students

‘...no feedback was given till the start of 2nd year when it would have been more useful at the time when you can remember what you have done...’ (L5/14)

‘...feedback was late last year...’ (L5/7)

‘...feel I would benefit from assessment feedback as quite often had no feedback last year...’ (L5/19)

‘...No feedback other than our grade...’ (L5/11)

**How feedback is used?**

Responses to the statement ‘The feedback I received prompted me to go back over the material covered on the course’ in question 6 indicates that 45% of year 1, 33% of year 2 and 88% of year 3 students agree (see table 7). The comments from students suggest that in year 1 the students appear to be doing this to find out where they have gone wrong and by year 3 they are going over course work to improve practice and achieve at a higher level:

‘...improve skills and give an idea of how well/bad we are doing...’ (L4/18)

‘...to know you're on the right/or wrong track...’ (L4/21)

‘... given feedback that.... was not appropriate in this setting. The feedback was timely and appreciated and I have reviewed my practice...’ (L4/14)

‘...made me revisit academic information to better understand a treatment plan..’ (L5/19)

‘...feedback from.... has been used to help improve my dissertation...’ (L6/15)

‘...recently I was given feedback... I really focused on this and resulted in an exam result of 72%’ (L6/9)
Similarly 42% in year 1, 35% in year 2 and 67% in year 3 agreed with the statement ‘I use the feedback received to go back over what I had done in my work’ (see table 7). Student comments indicate how they are doing this:

‘....in clinic I have acted on feedback to change the way I was doing a task...’ (L4/19)

‘....I was told gather more information from my patients which I have tried to do and now my presentation of the case history is much better....’ (L5/6)

‘...verbal feedback in clinic has helped me to understand the importance of communication between practitioner and patient and has helped me become a better communicator with the patients....’ (L5/8)

‘...when receiving assignment marks, to improve on the next assignment...’ (L5/16)

‘....feedback from year 2 has been helpful when preparing year 3 assignments...' (L6/17)

‘....I have acted on the feedback from last years assignments as this year there is more written work. I have done this to achieve a better mark....’ (L6/10)

‘...to improve assignment writing skills, following feedback on written assignments...' (L6/13)

‘...feedback on.... assignment from year 2 is being utilised when writing.... assignment in year 3...' (L6/18)

**Conclusions**

The premise underpinning the study related to feedback that informs and guides development, learning and improvement. This mixed methods study provides an insight into the varying student perceptions on a 3 year undergraduate programme of study. There is evidence that undergraduates at each level of the programme consider feedback as important to improve learning and practice. The evidence also suggests a there is a desire for more feedback and to receive that feedback prior to submission for summative
assessment of work. There is also a good indication that students make an effort to understand feedback offered and that students consider feedback should provide guidance for improvement with the opportunity to ask questions, with face to face feedback on a one to one basis being preferred. Differences have also emerged in areas related to: the purpose of feedback; what feedback should be given; when feedback should be given; how feedback is used.

The results suggest that year 1 students consider feedback provides confirmation of achieving the required standard and expect to be told if they are doing well. This indicates a passive approach to feedback and that they prefer positive feedback that gives reassurance and builds confidence. In contrast by year 3 students are taking an active approach to feedback. The data gathered in this regard suggests that students use feedback to indicate learning needs, develop practice and guide personal development. By year 3 the use of feedback leads to reflection and an action by the student.

In 2008 Roman et al suggested that self esteem had a strong indirect positive effect on academic achievement and is important in student development. The role of feedback in facilitating students' self regulation of learning may then be influenced by self esteem (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2008) and may explain why year 1 students generally consider the purpose of feedback is to confirm progress and indicate achievement. This is utilisation of feedback at its simplest level. Incorporating feedback to make a long term change in learning including progression and development for future learning is more sophisticated and requires the use of higher order skills to build on what has been learned from past experience (McMillan 2010). The evidence suggests that by year 3 students are utilising feedback from previous assessments to build on and make progress in the final year of study.

As all students have a choice in whether to engage with feedback the results may explain why some students chose not to. If feedback provided is not meeting the perceived need
particularly in year 1 of the programme, students may choose not to engage with that feedback. Whilst it is acknowledged that there is always scope for improving the provision of feedback to students there was a notable desire for more feedback (81% of year 2 students). Alongside this 73% of year 2 students consider feedback came too late to be useful. This was also evident in the comments made by year 2 students. This may reflect a change in the needs of students regarding feedback from year 1 to year 2. In year 1 only 40% of students agreed that feedback on assignments was useful compared to 70% in year 2 and 3. These finding compare favourably with research carried out by Dudek (2005) and van der Ridder (2008). As this study was carried out at the end of the first semester it may indicate that what students considered to be useful feedback in year 1 is no longer sufficient in year 2. This would warrant further investigation. Alongside the students’ belief that they did not get enough feedback, 42% of students in year 2 felt they did not understand the feedback given. This raises questions regarding the quality of the feedback provided and whether that feedback indicated how a student could improve. As the majority of year 1, 2 and 3 students agree that feedback given in clinic is useful and comments from students confirm that they are using feedback in clinic to develop skills and practice; it could be concluded that it is academic feedback rather than clinical feedback that the year 2 students are having problems with. However, as year 2 students have not undertaken any exams or assignments to date in this academic year, this may point to feedback on year 1 module assessments, and raises the question of whether the feedback in year 1 has relevance to the students in year 2. Did it feed-forward? Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggested reasons that may explain this including: lack of timeliness in receiving feedback; feedback that addressed past work rather than future work; insufficient explanation or comments that are context specific rather than generally applicable. The data suggests that in year 1 students want feedback that tells them how well they have done for example on exams, however, this may not then provide information that can feed forward into year 2. That is, it may not be providing suggestions for the future that can help students to meet the new challenges faced
in year 2 or in turn students may not see the relevance of feedback on year 1 assessments to year 2 modules. Also students may not be able or ready to accept feedback that feeds forward as they may not have developed the required skills to utilise suggestions for change in the future. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2004) assert that if feedback is to enhance student understanding and provide opportunities to improve it must be relevant to future work and students need to know how to use it. Studies by Walker and Stevens (2006) and Freake (2006) suggest the majority of feedback is focussed on content. However, unless that content is to be re-visited and students are aware of this, this type of feedback may not be considered as timely as the subject content of the course will have moved on.

By year 3 students are more likely to consider feedback on group or class work as useful but this view is only shared by 40% of participants. The students express concerns related to a perceived lack of knowledge of ‘what is expected’ which may suggest that student’s confidence in their ability to make judgments on performance is lacking. Mills and Glover (2006) suggest that peer-group and self-assessment has potential to enhance student understanding of the relationship between assessment criteria and required performance with feedback given being related to future tasks. However, it could be feedback focused on future tasks in their study that enhanced student understanding rather than who (peers or self) was delivering the feedback that accounted for the improved understanding. In the Coleman et al study (2006) students were required to complete a reflective diary detailing the use of feedback as part of the learning process. Again, rather than who gave the feedback it could have been this reflective activity the proved instrumental in bridging the gap between the assessment criteria and required performance. Within programme design there are implications and challenges for improving how students utilise peer feedback. There is an indication that the introduction of assessment strategies to build student confidence in self and peer-assessment may be required earlier. The use of reflection and activities linking assessment criteria and performance required in future tasks as suggested by Nicholson et al (2008) within the programme may also be warranted.
Many factors influence the effectiveness of feedback. Shute (2008) described the complex nature of feedback and the impact of student variables on effectiveness of feedback. The timing of feedback is also important. Evidence suggests that feedback related to the acquisition of skills is required immediately and that delays in receiving feedback on skills affect performance. Development of learning for retention, transfer of learning or conceptual tasks is more effective if feedback is delayed (Clariana 2000). Consideration needs to be given to the type and timing of feedback provided however, engaging the students interest in formative feedback and self directed learning earlier in the programme needs to be fostered. This poses a challenge in facilitating learner’s recognition of their role in receiving and using feedback and engaging with the process.

Limitations in the study can be attributed to variations in students’ interpretations of feedback particularly in relation to understanding and timing of feedback which may have influenced how students responded to the closed questions on the questionnaire. The qualitative data from the focus group was added to by students responding to open ended questions which added richness to the data collected. However, the opportunity to respond in a written format in the questionnaire rather than verbally in the focus group may have resulted in a restricted expression of student views. The study was restricted to one undergraduate programme which has both an academic and clinical component. It cannot be known if the data collected is a result of the programme and its clinical culture or whether they represent student views more broadly across the teaching establishment. Undertaking further study on other programmes would be required to establish this.

In summary the findings from this study suggest that students perceive the purpose of feedback differently depending on the year of study. There is also evidence that students use feedback received differently as they progress through the programme. The data suggests that there is a transition from students using feedback passively to gauge how well they are doing in the early stages of the programme to adopting an active approach in the
late stages of the programme. Further research exploring that developmental process may also be warranted.

**Contribution**

**What contribution might this work make to the literature?**

Insight has been gained into what students consider the purpose of feedback to be, how and when they would like to receive feedback and how they use feedback to improve skills and academic performance. The data suggests there is a developmental process from students wanting to be given a mark on their work, so they can identify how well they are doing in relation to the pass mark or their peers. This progresses to students wanting and expecting more detailed feedback, on what they have done well and where they have done not so well, so they can improve their work as they progress through the programme. Of course this may be related to those aspiring to higher outcomes regardless of the year of study and warrants further investigation. There may be some students who just want to pass and set the bar much lower, these students may approach feedback in a very different way however the analysis of data collected suggest that the differences in responses from students in year 1, 2 and 3 are not due to chance and show a large effect size in the variance between the groups. So the results may suggest that it may be that the aspirations of students change as they near the end of the programme. The findings can be used to ensure that students are provided with feedback that is relevant to their needs at each stage of the programme. By exploring what students believe to be the purpose of feedback and how it is used has illuminated the process of students moving from a passive approach to receiving feedback to actively seeking and using feedback to modify and develop their approach to learning and assessment. This information can be used to guide the teaching team in the type and amount of feedback to provide at each level of the programme and to stimulate ideas on how to engage learners’ in the process of recognising their role in receiving and using feedback earlier in the programme.
References


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