Students as Co-creators of an Online Assessment and Feedback Resource

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Introduction

It has been argued that nothing we do to, or for, our students is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we provide on it (Race et al., 2005). Assessment is an essential part of education and a key indicator of student learning. Feedback, when done effectively, is also central to student learning: not only does it provide justification for a mark or grade awarded, but it also guides students on what steps to take to improve their work, to motivate them to act on their assessment, and to develop regulatory skills to help monitor, evaluate, and direct their own future learning (Nicol, 2010). Few would dispute then, the importance of assessment and feedback. However, as reflected in NSS scores across the sector, students in higher education (university) are often least satisfied with assessment and feedback relative to other aspects of their experience. It therefore seems important and timely to reflect on, and seek to improve, current assessment and feedback practices.

A developing literature has begun to emerge, which signifies the importance of involving and engaging students as partners (Bovill et al., 2021). Partnership, in its most regularly utilised form, can be via the "student voice", where Student Representatives (usually) invite, collate, and put forward the views of their fellow students. These are then considered at Forum Events or Committee Meetings and have the potential to influence change. However, a more valuable form of partnership, which is becoming increasingly popular, is that of "student-action", where students are immersed in all aspects of decision-making processes and act as co-creators, co-leading on aspects of curriculum design, assessment and feedback, or another area relating to their learning experience (Millmore, 2021). This literature, sometimes referred to as staff-

student partnerships, student partnerships in assessment, and students as co-creators in education (not exhaustive), suggests that empowering and engaging students in the design of assessment and feedback resources, and providing opportunities for dialogic feedback on those resources, may help to optimise student learning and the student experience. In itself, opening a teacher-student dialogue on assessment and feedback may help with addressing the widely reported student dissatisfaction which, according to Nicol (2010), may be a symptom of the unidirectional nature of feedback (especially of written feedback) which has become a monologue replacing much of the student-teacher interaction. These notions provide inspiration for the present study.

Notwithstanding some of the challenges associated with involving students as partners (Bovill et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2023), five principles of student partnership in assessment and feedback at university have been offered (Bovill et al., 2021): Develop assessment and feedback dialogue; Share responsibility for assessment and feedback; Create an assessment and feedback environment that fosters trust; Nurture inclusive assessment and feedback processes; and Connect partnership in assessment and feedback with curriculum and pedagogy. While all principles are important, 'dialogue including students is a good place to start as academics can make assumptions about what students find helpful (or not) in assessment and feedback' (Bovill et al., 2021, p.7). Indeed, a recent study that thematically analysed the content of feedback-related conversations between staff and students, found that as the conversations progressed, some became productive in identifying specific ways to improve feedback practices (Matthews et al., 2023). For instance, providing feedback in a sensitive manner that considers the emotional impact that this can have on students was identified as an area for improvement (Matthews et al., 2023). Having students (more actively) involved in the design of assessment and feedback resources, would therefore seem timely and important.

In the present (case) study, we describe and provide the first evaluation of a newly developed "Assessment Hub" (which included a range of innovative assessment and feedback resources) that was co-conceived and co-created by university students and their programme teams (i.e.,

university staff). This "Hub" was developed based on the student and staff recommendations through the summer of 2022 and implemented from the start of term that followed.

Method

Creation of the "Assessment Hub"

Two group discussions were held, one with Student Representatives and one with staff, to negotiate all aspects of this project from the design of the resources, to its content and its evaluation procedures. Ahead of these discussions, Student Representatives also surveyed students from all years (Year 1, 2 and 3) to inquire about specific needs and resources that students would find helpful to be included in the "Hub". This survey fed back into the student-staff group discussion but also into one-to-one discussions with members of staff who volunteered to create short videos or written resources that would address student needs. It was established via these discussions, that the "Hub" would be made available on the programme page, and would include resources on: what assessment is (its function and purpose); the marking criteria (how students should use it and how staff use it); examples of assessed work; explanations of the feedback; clarity regarding what common comments mean, such as how to write more critically; as well as guidance and tips from alumni students, who have successfully navigated assessment on their studies. After a dialogue between Student Representatives and the programme team (staff), the resources (form and composition) of the "Assessment Hub" were established.

Sample and Procedure of Evaluation Survey

A total of 48 university students (approximately one-fifth of those eligible from the programme concerned) participated in this study (n = 9 attended Year 1; n = 5 attended Year 2; n = 33 attended Year 3; one student did not disclose their year group). Students were self-selectively sampled by responding to an advert about the study disseminated on the programme page and promoted by Student Representatives. Ethical approval for the study was obtained by the University's Research Ethics Committee.

Measures

An online self-report survey was created in Qualtrics. This included closed and open-ended questions that were designed to capture student views on the newly developed "Assessment Hub" and its resources. Specifically, it included: Part 1 - a series of positive statements relating to the Assessment Hub (e.g., "The resources on the Assessment Hub gave me a good understanding of how to approach an assessment") where students were required to respond using a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree); Part 2 - students rated how helpful they found each of the video resources using a scale that ranged from 1 (not helpful at all) to 10 (extremely helpful); and Part 3 - three open questions asking general feedback about the quality of resources developed and more specific feedback relating to selected resources in the "Hub".

Data Analysis

For closed-ended questions, a descriptive quantitative analysis was used to reflect students' agreement with statements about the Assessment Hub in Part 1 and average student ratings in Part 2. A thematic analysis was used to analyse students' responses to open-ended questions: this allowed for richer descriptions of the data and was congruent with the focus on identifying recurrent patterns (themes) across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, this involved: 1) familiarization with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing the report.

Results

Quantitative Analyses: Parts 1 and 2

Table 1 shows a summary of students' closed-ended responses capturing their overall evaluation of different aspects of the "Hub".

Table 1. Percentages of student responses to each one of the questions.

Survey questions and answers	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. Understand how to use the Hub.	6.3	6.3	10.4	31.3	45.8
2. Understand why/how the Hub was developed.	8.3	2.1	4.2	41.7	43.8
3. Understand what assessment is.	6.3	2.1	10.4	50	31.3
4. Understand how to approach assessment.	4.2	4.2	12.5	39.6	39.6
5. Understanding marking criteria.	2.1	6.3	22.9	35.4	33.3
6. Understanding of how to deal with feedback.	4.2	6.3	16.7	39.6	33.3
7. Usefulness of student graduates' experiences.	6.3	10.4	22.9	33.3	27.1
8. Feel more confident about assessment.	4.2	2.1	8.3	45.8	39.6
9. Feel less anxious about assessment.	4.2	6.3	22.9	20.8	45.8
10. Clearer understanding of assessment.	4.2	2.1	12.5	47.9	33.3
11. Help with future assessments.	4.2	8.3	18.8	35.4	33.3
12. Plan to engage more with the Hub.	4.2	-	18.8	37.5	39.6
13. Wish the Hub was available last year.	6.3	6.3	18.8	37.5	31.3
14. Resources clear and accessible.	6.3	-	10.4	43.8	39.6

Note: survey questions are shortened and paraphrased. Percentages are displayed in this table.

It can be seen in Table 1, that the majority of students agreed or strongly agreed with positive statements about the "Hub", thus indicating that it was seen as a valuable and developmental resource.

Students were also asked to rate how useful they found each video using a scale ranging from 1 to 10 (see Figure 1).
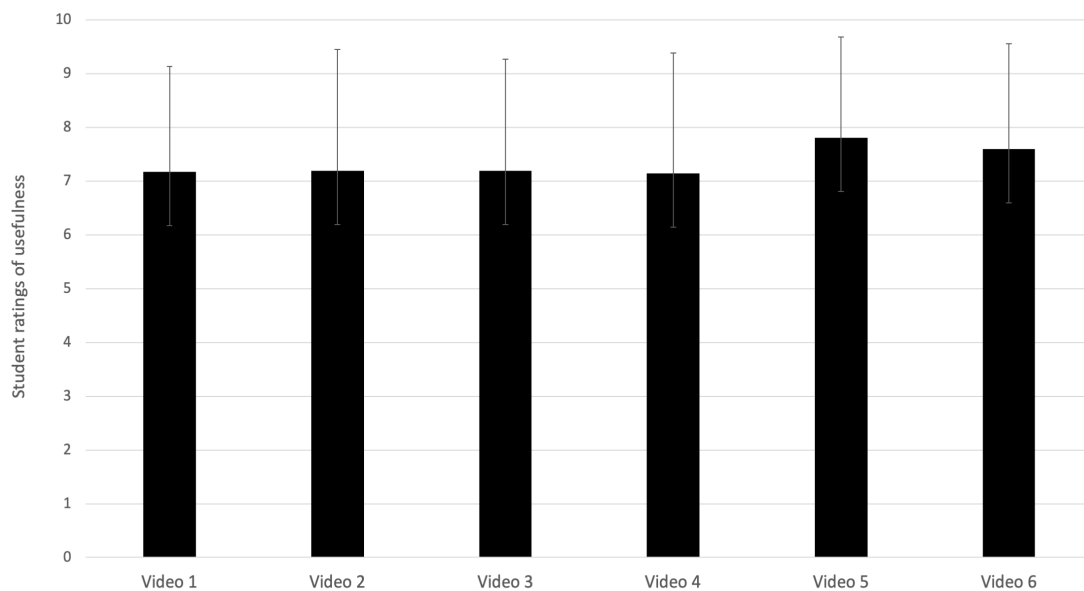

 Figure 1. Student ratings on level of usefulness (scale of 1 to 10) for each video.

As can be seen in Figure 1, average ratings for all videos were high, with Videos 5 ("Undergraduate assessment criteria for essays") and 6 ("How to deal with feedback") receiving the highest ratings.

Qualitative Analyses: Part 3

Thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses identified three superordinate themes:

      1. Cognitive Benefits and Enhanced Understanding

      2. Emotional Benefits: Raised Confidence and Reduced Anxiety

      3. Optimising the Range and Delivery of Resources

1. Cognitive Benefits and Enhanced Understanding

Students found the videos on assessment processes, the marking criteria, and feedback resources to be highly informative. Specifically, they provided greater clarity regarding the marking criteria and showed how this is effectively applied to an example essay:

> *"I found the videos on undergraduate assessment criteria video and example essay marking video most helpful as I could more specifically learn about the criteria for writing 'critical' essays, which is something that is consistent throughout most modules but also sometimes difficult to differentiate from writing descriptive essays."* **(P32)**
> *"I found essay marking example to be the most helpful because I have a better understanding of assessors' expectations. Also, I can get a sense of the marking process so that I know what the things are I should pay more attention to."* **(P2)**

Students also found the guidance on feedback to be helpful, offering a lens for self-reflection and future development:

> *"I found the resource about how to deal with feedback quite helpful because it helps me reflect on my shortcomings and correct them so I can do better next time."* **(P26)**

These findings corroborate the statistical findings, suggesting that the "Hub" was able to promote awareness and support understanding so that the students can be more aware of how to work effectively to optimise the quality of their writing and also how to deal effectively with feedback to optimise self-improvement.

2. Emotional Benefits: Raised Confidence and Reduced Anxiety

Students also reported an increased confidence in addressing feedback and a reduction in anxiety after engaging with the "Hub". The Alumni Assessment Experience video in particular was found to relieve students' anxiety about grades, as well as past and future learning journeys:

> *"The video—How to deal with feedback—it makes me more confident when dealing with feedback."* **(P59)**
>
> *"The video with alumni sharing their experiences and feeling about the grades and feedbacks. It made me feel less anxious about my grade."* **(P8)**
>
> *"I like when alumnus shared their stories on assessments, quite heart-warming and feeling less anxious to know that they have gone through the same things as us."* **(P38)**

These findings support and extend the statistical findings, which identify emotional benefits (i.e., relating to confidence and anxiety reduction) resulting from engagement with the "Hub".

3. Optimising the Range and Delivery of Resources

Some developmental opportunities were identified that students felt would further strengthen the effectiveness of the "Hub". Sometimes comments were related to the videos themselves, with suggestions for improvement:

> *"All the resources were quite helpful, but I would suggest for some of the videos to be a bit shorter or have some of the points written on power point slides so that it's easier to access in a shorter time period."* **(P36)**

Other suggestions related more to the provision of alternative and/or additional resources, to help clarify further the marking criteria as applied to different examples and assessment types:

> *"I'd like to see some sample essays relating to various type of questions."* **(P58)**

"I think something that I thought would be useful for my assessments in years 1 and 2 and struggled without was support for the short answer questions in the exams as I was not sure what to prepare /expect and the structure or style I should answer the given questions." **(P32)**

As anticipated then, the "Hub" resources are considered all-encompassing in their current form: there is much scope to continue with developments, and to further populate the "Hub", in order to be of improved value to students.

General Discussion

In the present case study, we established a student-staff partnership to co-develop and evaluate an "Assessment Hub", an online resource available through our undergraduate programme webpage, which included a range of video and written resources to support students with their assessment. An evaluation survey launched soon after the "Assessment Hub" was made available, suggested that the majority of students found the resources clear and accessible and understood their purpose and use. Engagement with the "Hub" led to better understanding of marking criteria, how to approach an assessment, and how to deal with feedback, while they reported that they felt more confident and less anxious about assessments, and that they plan to engage more with the "Hub". The majority of students also gave high ratings to the usefulness of the Assessment Hub video resources. Open-ended responses were thematically analysed and three themes were identified that corroborated the findings of the closed-ended questions: students elaborated on the fact that the resources enhanced their understanding of aspects of assessment such as the marking process (Theme 1: Cognitive Benefits and Enhanced Understanding) and increased their confidence, while reducing their anxiety (Theme 2: Emotional Benefits). Students finally offered specific suggestions for improvement of the "Hub" resources (Theme 3: Optimising the Range and Delivery of Resources), highlighting that there is scope for continuous improvement and enrichment of the Assessment Hub.

There are some important practical applications and future directions for the findings. First, on assessment and feedback, the "Hub" and its resources were viewed as clear, supportive, enhancing understanding, and developmental. Thus, other programmes might consider developing and making available something similar to showcase to their students. Following an approach that strengthens the role of students in the assessment process, the "Hub" is a work-in-progress: student suggestions for improvement will support the ongoing tailoring of these resources to student needs.

Second, the involvement of students as partners/co-creators, would seem a beneficial endeavour for programme teams in the development of assessment and feedback resources. Indeed, the active involvement of students in thinking about the feedback process and identifying what needs improvement in its delivery, may promote their interaction with feedback comments. As Nicol (2010) highlights, the quality of this interaction is equally important to the quality of feedback itself – the student as an active agent who seeks to receive and gain an understanding of feedback, is more likely to use this to change their future behaviour. Although we are aware that co-creation can be a lengthy and far from straightforward process (see Matthews et al., 2023), we envisage this work as the first step in involving students more actively in other areas of assessment and feedback, such as the design, grading, and feedback itself (rather than just the supportive resources available). This would not only further promote student interaction with feedback, but it would also involve a shifting view of students from informers, consultants, and participants, to partners who are given greater control of their learning (Bovill et al., 2021). It would also help to improve student sense of belonging, break power dynamics, and amplify student voices. Furthermore, an active commitment to designing aspects of assessment and feedback would help students to develop important employability skills such as leadership and communication (Millmore et al., 2021). Finally, student-staff partnerships can help staff members understand what feedback is most meaningful to students and become more empathic to how students may perceive and react to feedback (Matthews et al., 2023).

In conclusion, in the present study we have set assessment criteria and feedback at the centre of an ongoing group dialogue among students and university staff, and we have co-created a "Hub" of resources to support students with their needs. The "Hub" has received positive evaluations from students who report better understanding of assessment and feedback and increased confidence and reduced anxiety after engaging with the resources. Importantly, this is seen as a first step in a continuous process of tailoring these resources to student needs and towards a student-staff partnership that improves students' sense of belonging and amplifies their voices by making them active agents in supporting their own learning.

Acknowledgements

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