Assessment: Inspiring Learning

Responding to NSS results for assessment and feedback

Introduction

Results from the National Student Survey often show the need for a continued focus on the enhancement of assessment and feedback, and the 2021 results for Heriot-Watt are no different:

- For three of the four questions on assessment and feedback, HWU scores were meaningfully lower than their benchmark[1]
- For 5 of 24 subject areas, HWU scores were statistically significantly lower than the subject-level sector average for assessment and feedback. And for Q10 in particular ('Feedback on my work has been timely'), 9 of 24 subject areas were statistically significantly lower than the subject-level sector average[2]

> NSS results often highlight challenges around assessment and feedback. This guide provides some advice about how to respond to each of the four assessment and feedback questions in the NSS

Acting on your NSS results

There is no silver bullet for improving students' perceptions of assessment and feedback, but a lot can be achieved through better communication: we can learn a great deal by listening to students – through the NSS, but in many other ways as well; and we can help students progress through their programmes if we are clear what we expect from them in assessments, and how feedback will help them to improve. Clarity of communication isn't enough on its own – like all of us, students are busy people and may not pay as much attention to emails and course handbooks as we would like. Nevertheless, being upfront about how assessment and feedback will work in a course or programme is a good first step.

Specific tips and useful resources are provided below for each of the four NSS questions focused on assessment & feedback. In addition, relevant research into how students interpret each of those questions is included in Appendix A. Appendix B provides some guidance on unpacking NSS results for the assessment and feedback questions.

Q8. 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance'

Top tips:

- Make sure that marking criteria and rubrics are as clear and explicit as possible. Where you can, avoid vague or subjective terminology
- Don't just rely on providing students with clear marking criteria and rubrics: students may not read them, and if they do, they may not understand them
- Encourage students to engage with marking criteria and rubrics by, for example, talking about them in class, getting students to rephrase them in their own words, and getting students to apply them to samples of work
- Students should get additional preparation (and ideally a chance to practice) before encountering a new type of assessment, particularly if it is high-stakes

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[1] Benchmarks are created by the Office for Students on the basis of relevant factors such as our subject mix and the demographics of our students. Data are publicly available.
[2] See Appendix B for more information about how this was calculated.

Relevant resources from the LTA:

- [Quick Guide: Helping students appreciate what's expected of them in assessment](#)
- [Quick Guide: Giving formative feedback prior to submitting summative tasks](#)
- [Quick Guide: Getting students to self-assess to deepen their learning and develop feedback dialogues](#)
- [Quick Guide: Using exemplars to enhance learning and support achievement](#)

Q9. 'Marking and assessment has been fair'

Top tips:

- Helping students to understand what is expected of them (in the ways described for Q8) will help to improve their perceptions of the fairness of marking
- Make sure there is an effort to 'calibrate' the marking of colleagues responsible for the same assessment, so that students are being judged in broadly the same way
- Where different courses within a programme use the same type of assessment (e.g. lab reports or presentations) discuss as a teaching team what you expect from the students

Relevant resources from the LTA:

- [Quick Guide: Key assessment challenges and how to deal with them](#)

Q10. 'Feedback on my work has been timely'

Top tips:

- Think about streamlining the feedback process: techniques such as statement banks, audio feedback and voice recognition software can speed up the task of providing feedback
- For assessments where common issues often arise in students' work, feedback can be made more efficient by providing detailed whole-class feedback (perhaps including short video explainers) supplemented by brief individual feedback
- Consider giving the students quick, brief whole-class feedback, after marking a sub-set of submissions (e.g. 10%) to give a sense of the issues that are emerging (followed by the standard individual feedback)
- Fully consider the feedback workload when designing assessments. It may be appropriate to reduce word counts for assessments, to reduce the amount of assessment, or to prioritise particular assessments for feedback (e.g. assessments earlier in the semester rather than at the end)
- Students' perceptions of the speed of feedback turnaround times will be partly determined by expectations: wherever possible stick to deadlines, and make sure that any delays are communicated and explained

Relevant resources from the LTA

- [Quick Guide: Streamlining feedback on summative tasks](#)
- [Activity for teaching teams: Prioritising feedback features](#)

Q11. 'I have received helpful comments on my work'

Top tips:

- Write feedback with the students' progress in mind: what do they need to think about for future assessments they encounter?
- Make sure the tone is appropriate: supportive but honest, and focused on the work rather than the student themselves
- Use simple and clear language, and be explicit so that students know how to act on the feedback
- Think about actively encouraging students to engage with the feedback they do receive. For example, use an assessment with a two-stage submission (e.g. a draft followed by a final submission), ask students to respond to the feedback, or run an activity where students have to use the feedback to estimate the mark they will receive
- Students may have different ideas about what counts as 'feedback'; talking about it may help them to appreciate the purpose and value of more informal feedback such as a conversation in a tutorial, or a response to an email

Relevant resources from the LTA

- [Quick Guide: Commenting constructively on assessed work](#)
- [Quick Guide: Getting students to engage with feedback](#)
- [Activity for teaching teams: What does good and bad feedback look like?](#)
- [Activity for teaching teams: Benchmark your feedback quality](#)
- [Guide for students: Making the most of assessment and feedback](#)

Appendix A: Research findings about how students interpret NSS assessment and feedback questions

A limited amount of evidence is available about what students are thinking about when they respond to the individual assessment and feedback questions in the NSS.

Q8. 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance'

- One study found that students associated this question with the precision of marking criteria (Bennett and Kane 2014)

Q9. 'Marking and assessment has been fair'

- In a study in languages, linguistics and area studies, students associated this question with inconsistencies between markers on what they were looking for (Canning 2011)
- In one study, students associated this question with whether marking differentiates between strong and weak students (Bennett and Kane 2014)

Q10. 'Feedback on my work has been timely'

- A study found that students' perceptions of the timeliness of feedback was strongly influenced by context (such as what they thought was standard at other universities) (Brown et al 2015)
- A study with art and design students found that they tended to focus on recent experiences when thinking about the promptness of feedback, rather than the programme as a whole (Yorke et al 2014)
- In a study with chemical engineering students, 95% of first years stated that 'prompt feedback' would be returned within a week or less. For final year students the equivalent figure was 25%, and responses were generally more variable (50% stated that feedback would have to be returned within two week or less to be considered prompt) (Mendes et al 2011)

Q11. 'I have received helpful comments on my work'

- Art and design students were found to differ in how they understood the concept of feedback for this question: grades, written feedback, verbal feedback. (Yorke et al 2014)
- A different study in languages, linguistics and area studies found that students thought about feedback entirely in terms of written feedback when completing the NSS (Canning 2011)

References

Roger Bennett & Suzanne Kane (2014) Students' interpretations of the meanings of questionnaire items in the National Student Survey, *Quality in Higher Education*, 20:2, 129-164. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2014.924786

Gordon Brown, Alex Wood, Ruth Ogden & John Maltby (2015) Do student evaluations of university reflect inaccurate beliefs or actual experience? A relative rank model, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 28, 14-26. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/bdm.1827

John Canning (2011) *Understanding the National Student Survey: Investigations in languages, linguistics and area studies* (Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies)

Jill R. D. MacKay, Kirsty Hughes, Hazel Marzetti, Neil Lent & Susan M. Rhind (2019) Using National Student Survey (NSS) qualitative data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback, *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 4:1, 315-330. https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2019.1601500

Paula Mendes, Colin Thomas & Elizabeth Cleaver (2011) The meaning of prompt feedback and other student perceptions of feedback: should National Student Survey scores be taken at face value?, *Engineering Education*, 6:1, 31-39. https://doi.org/10.11120/ened.2011.06010031

Mantz Yorke , Susan Orr & Bernadette Blair (2013) Hit by a perfect storm? Art & Design in the National Student Survey, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39: 2014, 1788-1810. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.806465

Appendix B: Guidance on unpacking NSS results for assessment and feedback questions

In general, NSS results are best used as a starting point for further investigation: they can highlight areas of potentially positive or challenging practice, but they cannot provide definitive answers on their own. To understand the student experiences that NSS results represent, we need to draw on other existing data such as the free-text NSS comments and course-level surveys, and use additional mechanisms to understand students' perceptions. Useful supplementary evidence can come from focus groups, dedicated surveys such as the Assessment Experience Questionnaire, and conversations with student representatives (Buckley 2012).

Care should also be taken about how to deploy NSS scores. For example, it is unwise to compare scores from different subject areas (OfS 2020). It is also unwise to assume that relatively lower scores for assessment and feedback questions necessarily mean that those areas are somehow 'worse' than other programme aspects covered in the questionnaire (Buckley 2020).

The NSS scores themselves are not precise measures of students' perceptions, and there is some uncertainty that needs to be taken into account. A good way of accommodating the statistical noise around NSS scores is to use the 'confidence intervals' made publicly available by the Office for Students Confidence intervals represent the range around an actual NSS score in which we can be confident that the 'true' value falls (the margin of error, roughly speaking), and they are useful because they allow us to evaluate the 'statistical significance' of comparisons that we make using NSS scores: i.e. whether we can be confident that a difference in scores represents a genuine difference in students' experiences rather than random variation in the data. This guide from the QAA describes a couple of different ways that the confidence intervals can be used to make sense of NSS scores. The table below shows, for each subject at Heriot-Watt and each question, whether Heriot-Watt's score is statistically significantly higher or lower than the sector average (for that subject and question).

References

Alex Buckley (2012) *Making it count: Reflecting on the National Student Survey in the process of enhancement* (Higher Education Academy)

Alex Buckley (2020) Crisis? What crisis? Interpreting student feedback on assessment, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1846015

OfS (2020) *The National Student Survey: Consistency, controversy and change* (Office for Students)

National Student Survey results by subject area. Cells marked "+" (green) indicate HWU statistically significantly higher than sector average; "-" (orange) indicate HWU statistically significantly lower than sector average; "=" (grey) indicate no significant difference.

Question key:
1. Staff are good at explaining things.
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.
3. The course is intellectually stimulating.
4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.
5. My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth.
6. My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different
7. My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.
8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.
9. Marking and assessment has been fair.
10. Feedback on my work has been timely.
11. I have received helpful comments on my work.
12. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
13. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.
14. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.
15. The course is well organised and running smoothly.
16. The timetable works efficiently for me.
17. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.
18. The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well.
19. The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well.
20. specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to.
21. I feel part of a community of staff and students.
22. I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.
23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.
24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.
25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.
26. The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.
27. Overall satisfaction

Theme groupings: The teaching on my course (Q1–4); Learning opportunities (Q5–7); Assessment and feedback (Q8–11); Academic support (Q12–14); Organisation and management (Q15–17); Learning resources (Q18–20); Learning community (Q21–22); Student Voice (Q23–26); Overall satisfaction (Q27).

Subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Accounting	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	+	+	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Applied psychology	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	+	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Biosciences (non-specific)	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Building	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	-	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Business studies	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	-	=	=	-	=
Chemical, process and energy engineering	=	=	=	+	+	+	+	=	=	-	-	=	=	+	=	=	=	+	+	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=
Chemistry	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=
Civil engineering	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Computer science	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Design studies	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	=	+	=	=	+	=	-	=	+	=
Economics	=	=	=	+	+	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	+	+	=	+	+	=	=	+	=	+
Electrical and electronic engineering	-	=	=	=	=	-	-	-	-	-	-	=	-	-	-	=	-	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	-	=	=
Engineering (non-specific)	=	-	=	-	=	=	=	-	-	-	=	-	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-
Finance	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Law	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Management studies	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Marketing	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Mathematics	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Mechanical engineering	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	+	=	+	=	=	=
Others in language and area studies	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=
Physics	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	+	+	=
Planning (urban, rural and regional)	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	-	=	=	=	-	-	+	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=
Production and manufacturing engineering	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	-	=	=	=	=	=	-	-	-	-	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=
Statistics	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=	=

Key: ■ HWU statistically significantly higher than sector average (green) ■ HWU statistically significantly lower than sector average (orange)