

FOCUS ON: FEEDBACK FROM ASSESSMENT

What does Student-Led Teaching Award nomination data tell us about student perceptions of 'good' feedback?

A report by Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education Scotland

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The objective of this report is to enhance understanding of what students value in the feedback they receive from assessment. We have explored perceptions of ‘good’ feedback as expressed by students through Student-Led Teaching Award (SLTA) nomination data. The report draws on an analysis of recent SLTA data from ten students’ associations/students’ unions in the Scottish higher education sector. The Scottish higher education sector comprises nineteen higher education institutions (HEIs), and from students’ association websites there appear to be SLTA schemes within sixteen institutions. Ten students’ associations participated in this study by sharing their nomination data. This was provided on the basis of anonymity and not all organisations agreed to be named within this report. We have permission to acknowledge data contributed by: Abertay Students’ Association; Edinburgh University Students’ Association; Highlands and Islands Students’ Association; Robert Gordon University Students’ Association; Students’ Association of the University of the West of Scotland; University of St Andrews Students’ Association; University of Stirling Students’ Union and the University of Strathclyde Students’ Association. Appendix 1 indicates that of the ten organisations providing data, six had specific feedback award categories within their SLTA. A total of 4,982 nominations were received and of these an illustrative sample of 318 nominations from across the ten institutions was used to explore the weighting of different aspects of feedback. The focus in the following discussion is on the identification of the characteristics of ‘good’ feedback recognised by students in their supporting statements when nominating staff for SLTAs. Within this report, the exploration of student perceptions is purposefully considered independent of the academic literature on assessment feedback and SLTA schemes specifically.

1.2 Context: Focus On: Feedback from Assessment

This report is an output from the [Focus On: Feedback from Assessment project \(2017-18\)](#). QAA Scotland, in collaboration with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), manages Focus On projects to support the Scottish sector in enhancing specific areas of learning and teaching practice. The first Focus On project took place in 2014-15 to support the development of assessment and feedback policy and practice, and 2017-18 saw a return to a similar theme in Focus On: Feedback from Assessment. Both projects have emerged from, and link to, the enhancement-led approach to quality within the Scottish higher education sector. Central to this approach is the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), in which HEIs in Scotland participate. Two significant aspects of this framework are [Enhancement-Led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#) and the national cross-sector [Enhancement Themes](#). Focus On: Feedback from Assessment has emerged from the continued focus on developing good practice in feedback and assessment within the ELIR process (QAA Scotland, 2017) and complements the work in the [current Quality Enhancement Theme \(2017-20\)](#), ‘[Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience](#)’.

At the start of the current Focus On: Feedback from Assessment project, QAA Scotland consulted with all Scottish HEIs and students' associations to understand sector interest in the topic and to identify key themes for exploration. The outcomes of the consultation reinforced the sector commitment to understanding what students value in the feedback they receive from assessment, and informed the decision to explore what students think about the feedback they receive with an emphasis on exploring this topic within existing evidence. From this, QAA Scotland identified the nomination data within SLTAs as a potentially useful source of evidence from which to explore student perspectives on feedback.

1.3 Student-Led Teaching Awards in Scotland

Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs) are now well-established in the Scottish higher education sector. The year 2018 marks nearly a decade since the Higher Education Academy (now known as Advance HE) and National Union of Students Scotland SLTA pilot project (2009) was developed, building on work done in institutional schemes at the University of Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt University. Since the pilot, SLTAs have grown in popularity across the UK (Thompson and Zaitseva, 2012) as an example of a partnership approach between students' associations and their linked university/institution, as well as contributing to a culture of raising the profile of teaching and celebrating good teaching practice (Davies et al, 2012).

SLTAs provide students with the opportunity to nominate staff for awards; to express their understanding of excellent teaching and recognise and acknowledge good teachers. Many SLTAs have extended beyond teaching staff, acknowledging the positive contribution to student learning made by a range of staff. As student-led schemes, students' associations identify the award categories, lead the SLTA process, and take responsibility for organising the award ceremonies. As noted by Davies et al. (2012) the awards are 'a promising way to find out more about what students value most in their learning experience, including their conceptions of excellence in teaching'. Indeed, a strength of the SLTAs has been the emphasis on the quality of the nomination data as a key determinant of the award winner, rather than the quantity of nominations (Davies et al, 2012). This has resulted in nomination statements in which students articulate the reasons why the staff member should win the award.

As each students' association structures and manages its SLTA process according to its own institutional context, there are similarities and differences in the SLTAs across the Scottish sector which should be acknowledged in any study which considers such data. Within each SLTA, students are invited to nominate members of staff for awards in different categories. However, the categories of awards vary in each institution and across the sector there is evidence of a range of awards which focus on teaching staff, support staff and postgraduates who teach, as well as awards focused on specific areas such as use of technology, innovative teaching, and assessment and feedback. The SLTAs are therefore a potentially valuable source of evidence to understand student perceptions of good feedback from assessment, drawing on the information students provide in support of their nominations of staff members to win teaching awards. Student perspectives on good teaching can be found in teaching award categories that are focused on feedback and assessment as well as in what, for the purpose of this report, could be called 'general' teaching award categories such as 'Best Lecturer' where students may make reference to good feedback practice in their comments to support this nomination.

2. Research approach

To investigate student perceptions of 'good' feedback, the study adopted an exploratory approach to analysing the qualitative statements in the nomination data. The primary approach was a qualitative and inductive analysis, identifying themes in the way students referred to feedback in the SLTA nomination data. The focus was on identifying aspects of feedback which are valued by students and which they identify as good feedback, as articulated in their nominations. This reflects the emphasis within qualitative research on generating meaning from data, particularly understanding the research subject's point of view, in this case the student making the nomination (Cousin, 2009). While the approach is predominantly qualitative, there is a quantitative element to the analysis through providing the weighting of the different themes drawing on a subset sample of nomination data (Bryman, 2001). This approach was used to explore whether some themes were more dominant than others.

2.1 Methodology

The qualitative analysis of the nomination data took a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, cited in Bryman, 2001) informed approach, identifying themes as emerging from the data, rather than analysing the data using a set of pre-conceived themes as informed by academic literature on feedback or similar analyses of SLTA data. Therefore, the analysis was not driven by academic literature or sector reports on feedback, the student experience, or SLTAs. The nomination data was analysed using a coding process that involved systematically working through the text and identifying sections of data to be coded; a code denoting a section of text related to one type of phenomenon. For example, that the feedback was constructive, or that the feedback was balanced. There were different stages of coding, moving from broad identification of a large number of potential codes, towards focused narrowing of codes, identification of themes and eventual saturation. Saturation can be understood as the stage of analysis the data enables the research question to be answered (What does Student-Led Teaching Award nomination data tell us about student perceptions of 'good' feedback?) and when no new codes or themes emerge through continued investigation of more nomination data (Bryman, 2001).

Coding of data allows the researcher to organise the data and identify the main themes within the nomination data as part of an interrogation of student perceptions of good feedback. Following this qualitative interpretation of the data, using the final Code Structure (See Appendix 2), a sample of the nomination data was used to indicate the weighting attributed to different themes. This approach is more quantitative in nature and provides the reader with an understanding of the priority of different themes within a sample year of the nomination data.

3. Analysis of nomination data

3.1 Nature of data

Given the focus on student perceptions of feedback, the SLTA nomination data is a valuable source of existing evidence, particularly given the richness of information within each nomination (noted in Student-led Teaching Awards in Scotland Section 1.3). However, there are variations in the nature of the data. Students' associations take different approaches to organising their SLTA schemes, with variations in scheme names, categories of awards, nomination processes, and the type of data captured during the award process. Given this variation, it is useful to consider in more detail the nature of the data reviewed in this study.

3.1.1 Different award categories and selection of nomination data

A key area of difference in the data is in the categories of awards namely, organisations with feedback-focused categories, such as 'Best Feedback', and those that do not have such awards. These other award categories have been labelled as general awards within this study and include for example, 'Outstanding Teacher' or 'Most Supportive Teacher'. While general award categories are not necessarily focused on feedback, within the nominations for these awards there are references to feedback practices in support of the nomination. Therefore, the nomination data for general awards contains insight into student perceptions of feedback.

To enhance the analysis in this study, in addition to requesting nomination data from SLTA schemes with feedback focused awards, in consultation with the students' associations for those STLA schemes without a feedback focused award, student representatives were asked to recommend award categories in which feedback was referenced in the nomination data. Where nominations in general award categories made explicit reference to feedback, the nomination was included in the sample for analysis. It should be noted that a large amount of data was provided by students' associations that was not included in the data analysis because of the specific focus on feedback for this study. Of SLTAs with feedback focused awards, we analysed only the nomination data for specific feedback awards, on the premise that the existence of this category may channel nominations of good feedback practice.

So, within the analysis, all nomination data for feedback-focused awards were coded. However, for general awards categories the researcher identified the nominations that made reference to feedback. It is notable that in the general award nomination data there were many examples of good practice that we associated with feedback. However, the methodological decision to undertake an inductive analysis of the data informed the choice not to include content that had not been explicitly identified as feedback by the students providing the nomination. Key within this inductive approach is to understand how students perceive good feedback, so even though there were practices associated with good feedback, if the student did not label this as good feedback, it was not included within the sample.

3.1.2 Quality and quantity of nomination data

Another qualification on the nature of the nomination data is the variation in length and focus of each nomination. As could be expected, there are variations in the length of nomination statements with some SLTAs allowing fuller responses of several paragraphs and others providing the space for shorter nominations. Furthermore, it is notable that the content of nominations can be framed and influenced by the guidance in the nomination form. Not all institutions provided the nomination form wording in the data submitted, and while the study is aware that some institutions purposefully use open wording in the nomination form, there was evidence to suggest that some were more directive or prescriptive in encouraging students to address particular areas. In the context of the strength of the nominations informing the decision on award winners this is understandable, but it is worth keeping this in mind as a caveat when using the data as evidence of student perceptions of good feedback, and as a potential point of support and development for SLTAs.

3.2 Data reviewed and illustrative sample

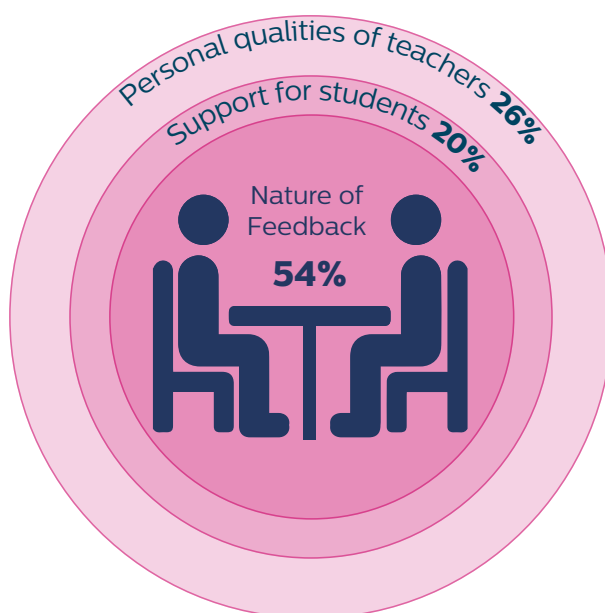
All Scottish students' associations were contacted to ask if they would be willing to contribute nomination data to be included in the analysis. Ten students' associations participated by sharing their nomination data. Of the ten students' associations providing data, six had specific feedback categories within their SLTA. A number of students' associations provided several years of data for analysis which were reviewed when developing the coding structure for analysis and revising the codes and categories. In order to provide a sense of the weighting attributed to different codes or categories, the decision was taken to analyse one year of data (2017 or 2018) from each organisation as a sample (see Appendix 1). The nominations from the most recent SLTA award year provided by each organisation were used for the sample. A total of 4,982 nominations were received and of these an illustrative sample of 318 nominations from across the ten institutions was used to explore the weighting of different aspects of feedback. With the exception of cases discussed below, there were no discernible differences between the codes and categories emerging in the feedback-focused award nominations compared to the general award nominations, therefore Section 4, combines discussion of both.

4. Discussion of ‘good feedback’

In SLTA nominations, students articulate aspects of feedback that they value and recognise as good practice meriting recognition for the teacher. The richness of the data contains references to multiple aspects of the nature of feedback, enabling us to deepen our understanding of student perspectives. The ‘Nature of Feedback’ is the main theme within the analysis however, two additional overarching themes also emerged in the data: ‘Personal Qualities of the Teacher’ and ‘Support for Students’. The Nature of Feedback, is the main theme that is used in the analysis to understand statements in which the students comment explicitly on feedback as helpful, useful or personalised, or comment on the method of receiving feedback, turnaround and quantity. What was noted in the nomination data, is that students commonly also commented on the nature of the support they received from their teacher (in more general terms and not always confined to feedback) as well as commenting on the personality or characteristics of the lecturer. These two themes may not seem to be explicitly linked to feedback but the students are motivated to include reference to these areas in their nomination statements, therefore highlighting that these provide not only the context in which good feedback is provided, but also shape the relationship between the student and their teacher and therefore ultimately shape the nature of feedback. For example, if a student perceives a teacher to be approachable, they are more likely to discuss feedback with the tutor and develop a dialogue around feedback.

In identifying these three main themes, the nomination data was coded into nineteen distinct codes, two of which are aggregated codes of a larger number of specific codes. It was through developing the coding structure (see Appendix 2) and considering the weighting of the different codes in the illustrative sample that the three main themes were identified. Within the analysis of the illustrative sample, the Nature of Feedback accounted for 54 per cent of the codes, Personal Qualities of the Teacher for 26 per cent of the codes and Support for Students for 20 per cent of the codes.

Figure 1. Analysis of nomination data: broad themes and percentage weighting within illustrative sample



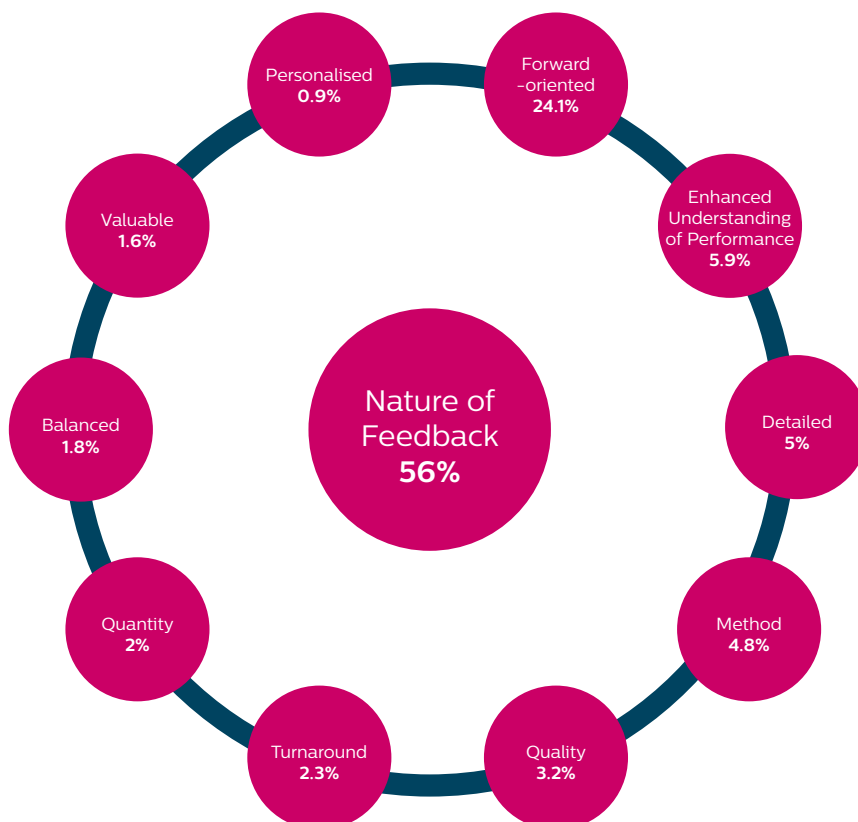
As students situate their discussion of feedback in relation to the support they receive as students, as well as the relationship with their teacher as shaped by the personal attributes of the teacher, each of the three themes is discussed in turn below. The discussion will explore what students value relative to each theme and the weighting of each theme and its relevant codes is provided in figures 2, 8 and 9. Capital letters are used throughout the report to identify when the discussion of certain attributes is directly linked to the coding structure. Quotations are illustrative, rather than drawn from the data, and are used to demonstrate the sentiment in nomination data. The discussion of each theme concludes with recommendations for practitioners. Directed towards teachers and staff providing feedback to students, these aim to encourage reflection on practice on the basis of themes emerging from the nomination data. A broader set of recommendations for students, students' associations and higher education institutions is provided at the end of the report.

4.1.1 Nature of Feedback

The analysis in this report identified ten codes which were used to interpret what students value in feedback from assessment. The ten codes are identified in Figure 2. In the following discussion there is a detailed examination of Forward-oriented and Enhanced Understanding of Performance before exploring the other codes related to the Nature of Feedback. Forward-oriented and Enhanced Understanding of Performance were significant topics in the nomination data from across the students' associations. Given the weighting attributed to each of these codes in the illustrative sample, the decision was taken to explore these further, and draw on further subcodes to indicate the different dimensions to these aspects of feedback.

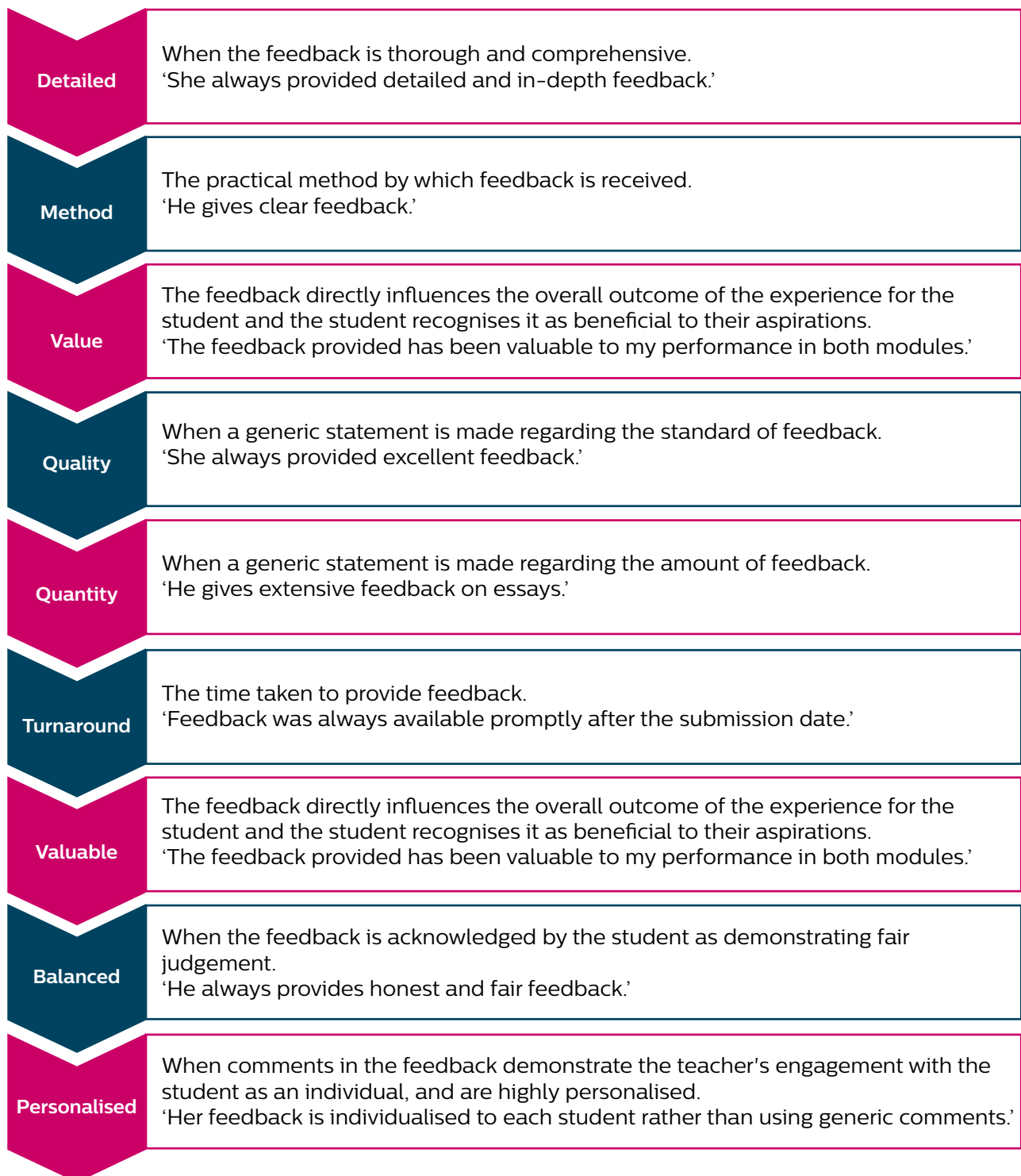
Figure 2. Theme: Support for Students

The most prominent theme in the nomination data surrounds the discussion of feedback itself, of which 54 per cent of the codes were attributed when analysing the weighting of different codes.



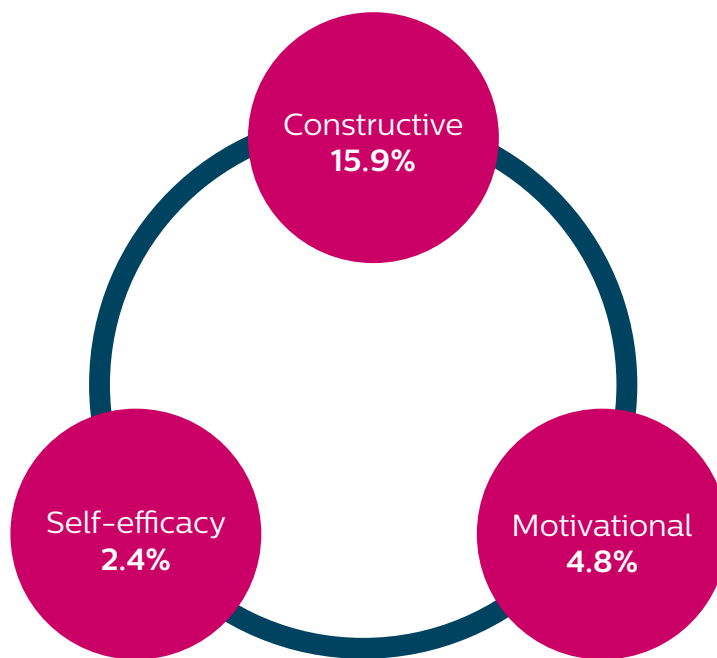
An observation on the nomination data, is that students frequently refer to Enhanced Understanding of Performance and Forward-Oriented feedback together. This was investigated further and while the feedback-focused and general award categories have been analysed together, it was observed that the combination of both of these elements was more prominent in feedback-focused award categories, which may well be due to the focused attention on articulating the different dimensions of feedback within each nomination statement.

Figure 3. Definitions and illustrative examples for codes within theme of Support for Students



When exploring the Nature of Feedback, the single most important sub-theme in the nomination data was recognition of what can be called Forward-oriented feedback; in the illustrative sample this comprised 24.1 per cent of the codes. Throughout the nominations there was repeated recognition of the significance of feedback that enables students to develop future performance whether that be on their module, their broader studies, and/or in terms of their pursuit of professional or career goals. To deepen our understanding of such feedback, Forward-oriented was considered in more detail, with the identification of further subcodes including: Constructive; Motivational; and Self-efficacy.

Figure 4. Subcodes in aggregated code of Forward-oriented



Descriptions of feedback as Constructive (15.9 per cent) were frequent across the sample of nomination data, therefore this was the most dominant sub-code in the Forward-oriented category. Perceptions of good feedback as Constructive can be seen when students refer to feedback as identifying areas for future development and supporting strategies or actions that can be undertaken by the student to improve their work. This is exhibited in statements such as ‘The feedback was a great help for future assignments and the calibre of work I submit’. However, there were also lots of references to feedback as ‘constructive’ or ‘helpful’ with limited qualification or expanded statements on what this meant to the student. Throughout the analysis, the researcher always sought to understand the meaning in each nomination statement beyond use of language that can be subjectively interpreted, but it was noted that frequently the word ‘constructive’ was used as a statement with little qualification. This is signposted as a qualification in the data analysis, as it could also be the case that students have been prompted to use this wording because of the guidance in the nomination process. Equally, that a large number of nominations which make reference to constructive feedback (whether by explicitly using this word, or providing more detail) suggests a wider recognised importance of this type of feedback among students.

Other Forward-oriented feedback practices that students value include when feedback aims to change, or which results in a change of, perceptions and so can be labelled as Motivational. This can be feedback which prompts the student to ‘want to do better’ – for example in performing better in future assignments – and can also refer to explicit goals such as aiming for certain grades or aspiring to pursue certain careers. In the nomination statements, students value feedback which supports and enables them to identify and aspire to meet goals, as well as supporting the belief in their ability to reach their goals, referred to as the development of Self-efficacy. In this sense, students value the transformative nature of feedback and recognise the role of their teacher’s comments in confidence-building.

Figure 5. Definitions and illustrative examples for aggregated code Forward-Oriented

Personal Qualities of Teacher is a central theme in the nomination data, of which 26 per cent of the codes were attributed when exploring the weighting of codes in the illustrative sample.

<p>Forward-oriented Constructive</p>	<p>When the feedback supports future action by identifying areas requiring development and actions to improve future achievement. ‘The feedback was a great help for future assignments and the calibre of work I submit.’</p>
<p>Forward-oriented Motivational</p>	<p>When the feedback/teacher motivates a student to identify and achieve a goal. ‘Her communication skills, passion for the subject and competence as a lecturer are so inspiring and have influenced my determination to become a teacher.’</p>
<p>Forward-oriented Self-efficacy</p>	<p>When the feedback/teacher instils in the student a belief in their abilities. ‘If it wasn’t for the helpful feedback comments in my assignments I would be feeling more nervous about the exams.’</p>

Enhanced Understanding of Performance

As well as recognising feedback which shapes future performance, students value the role of feedback resulting in an Enhanced Understanding of Performance. Within the study, the decision was taken to explore this further and as an aggregated code, sub-codes can be used to enhance our understanding. This aggregated code was used to identify aspects of nomination statements where students identified that feedback helped them to reflect on and understand their performance in previous assessments: ‘His feedback made it clear what I had done well and the areas that needed development to have achieved a higher mark.’ Exploring further, students make reference to feedback which: provides Clarity or lucidity of understanding; is Clear or easily understood rather than ambiguous; prompts them to Reflect; and which is Insightful in allowing them to consider the topic at a deeper level. This can be done through prompts and structured activities around assignments and as part of the feedback dialogue. There were also statements which pointed to development of student understanding through the provision of Specific and Focused feedback and that students appreciated these more than what they identified as ‘umbrella’ or ‘generic’ feedback. All of these sub-codes (as defined in Figure 7) highlight the different dimensions to feedback that are helpful for students, and it is notable that the nominations focus not just on the feedback, but the impact of feedback in supporting students as active, reflective and self-directed learners.

Figure 6. Sub-codes in aggregated code of Enhanced Understanding of Performance

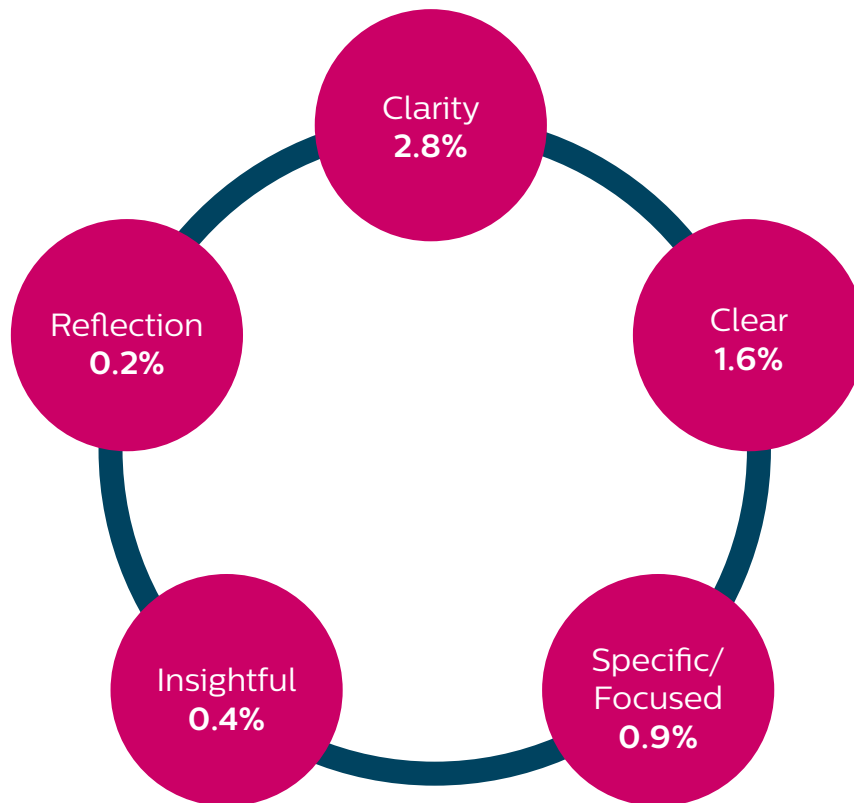


Figure 7. Definitions and illustrative examples for aggregated code Enhanced Understanding of Performance

Clarity	When the feedback provides lucidity of understanding. ‘His obvious expertise in the subject area has helped to embed learning in the students and enabled me to look at the subject at a deeper level.’
Clear	When the feedback is easily understood and not ambiguous. ‘He gives clear feedback.’
Specific/ Focused	When the feedback is considered to be focused and not to be generic. ‘She never makes general umbrella comments but always makes comments that focus on specific statements and points made in my assignments.’
Insightful	When the feedback is considered by the student to provide a deeper level of understanding of the topic. ‘The feedback provided good insight into current research that has helped with the direction of my own research.’
Reflection	When feedback encourages the student to reflect on their performance. ‘We were encouraged to submit a self-evaluation template along with our assignment and we used this to reflect on our feedback.’

Other ways in which students articulated the nature of feedback

As well as the importance of feedback that allows students to understand their performance in assessments and develop future performance, other aspects of good feedback are identified in the nomination data. In particular, Detail in feedback which is thorough and comprehensive is clearly welcomed by students, although there is some appreciation in the nominations that providing this type of feedback is time consuming, therefore pointing to a tension within the provision of feedback. Also, across the sample of institutions, students commented on Method in focusing on varied approaches to feedback, and of feedback provided in different environments. There were references to the use of technology and what could be labelled as 'innovative' approaches including audio-visual. However, more commonly students referred to the different ways teachers provided assessment feedback with much acknowledgement of feedback as dialogic, rather than the end product to be transmitted from the teacher to the student. Students commented on the structure of the assessment process within the module where this was unique in comparison to other modules, for example assessments including pre-submission activities such as seminar presentations or early submission of assessment plans. Most commonly students recognised feedback being presented in different contexts - including one-to-one feedback sessions, small group feedback sessions and feedback provided within larger classes such as lectures - as good feedback practice. Indeed, such approaches to feedback, could be seen as a strategy to counter issues of large class sizes and workload identified earlier in the report.

Other topics referenced by students included Quality, Quantity, and Turnaround. Quantity and Quality were used to code nomination statements that were generic regarding the standard of feedback (Quality) or the amount of feedback (Quantity). These are not insignificant, as they indicate that students are nominating their teachers when they perceive that they are receiving lots of excellent feedback, however, it is more detailed comments which expand on the nature of the feedback that are perhaps more beneficial for this study in understanding conceptions of good feedback.

Students refer to Turnaround as the time taken for the teacher to return the assessment feedback. For example, 'Feedback was always available very soon after the submission date.' This was interpreted as distinct from Time where the teacher's time commitment was articulated in a more general sense, such as the teacher making the time to communicate or discuss feedback. Therefore, these are discussed in distinctly different ways, but can also be seen as related. Commonly, in commenting on turnaround, the nomination data reveals a recognition of assessments that are returned 'quickly', 'promptly' or that the feedback is 'timely'. These can all be subjectively interpreted although there are some qualifications referring to time periods such as 'a couple of days' or acknowledging that this has been done 'over the weekend'. Such turnaround will be well within institutional or departmental expectations, and this quick timescale is appreciated in the nominations. However, the analysis also points to the complexity in the issues of turnaround. Some of the nomination statements, and potentially the use of the word 'timely', suggest that student perspectives on turnaround are framed by the usefulness of the feedback given other assessments the student has to complete, for example, preparation for exams. That students value timely feedback is a positive indication that they want to be able to act on the feedback, and for feedback to be useful. This is further reinforced, and further supported by the prominent recognition of forward-oriented feedback discussed earlier, and also when students refer to feedback as Valuable.

Other aspects of the nature of feedback which arise in the sample refer to feedback as Balanced and the sense that teachers have been fair in the appraisal of performance, acknowledging both the strengths and the weaknesses of the work completed. Similarly, the depth of engagement of the teacher in the work of the student, through providing Personalised and tailored feedback is another aspect that students value in the nomination data. Such personalised feedback can be time consuming but can foster strong relationships between students and teachers, and act as a further source of encouragement as the tutor is seen to invest in the student's success.

4.1.2 Nature of Feedback: Key issues for discussion

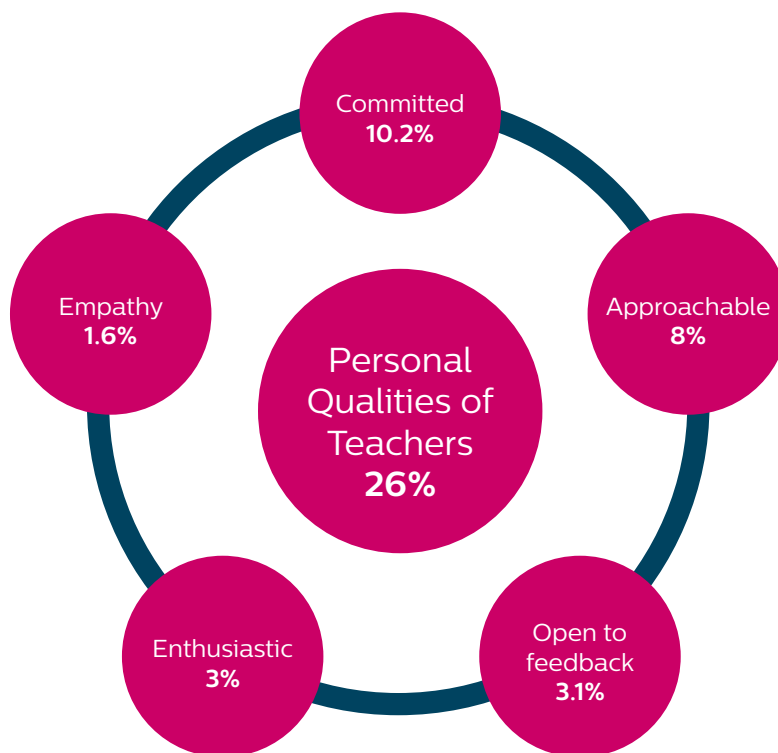
- Students value feedback that is forward-oriented and which contains clear support and guidance on ways they can develop their future work. Within your feedback to students can you identify three action points for a student to take forward?
- In preparing for future assignments, is there the opportunity to ask students to signpost the ways in which they sought to address previous feedback from assessments? You could ask students to identify this in preparation for a one-to-one discussion or small group activity. Or within a cover sheet for their next assignment, ask them to identify three ways they acted on/sought to address previous feedback.
- To encourage student reflection, what more might you do to enable you to understand areas of importance for students? For example, could you ask students to submit a cover sheet with each assessment in which they identify specific areas on which they would appreciate your feedback?
- Students value feedback which recognises them as individuals, makes them feel supported and builds self-efficacy. Ensuring that feedback is personalised is particularly challenging in large student groups. Where meeting students individually is challenging, using cover sheets that include a reflective statement on the way they engaged with previous feedback, or areas on which they specifically want feedback on and why, can allow you to tailor your feedback to the individual and perhaps acknowledge some of their identified interests or areas of challenge in their reflective statement.
- Feedback can also be used to develop the student's commitment to their subject area, degree pathway or professional goals. Are there ways they can be encouraged to engage with feedback linked to their degree pathway or professional goals? For example, tailored feedback commenting on their journey towards joining a certain profession?
- The focus in feedback should not simply be on quick turnaround of feedback, but ensuring that timescales for feedback enable students to reflect and act on feedback in future assessments. How can you schedule feedback effectively considering assessment timing?
- Students recognise good feedback as provided in different contexts and at different stages before, during and after the assessment. Could you consider providing different types of feedback, and signposting to students when feedback is being provided?

- What opportunity is there to explore with student cohorts the different ways of providing feedback as a way of enhancing their assessment literacy? Could this be explored within module and programme teams?
- It is important to provide clarity of expectations on assessment turnaround times. What could you do to improve your practice in this area?

4.2.1 Personal Qualities of the Teacher

Figure 8. Theme: Personal Qualities of the Teacher

Personal Qualities of the Teacher is a central theme in the nomination data, of which 26 per cent of the codes were attributed when exploring the weighting of codes in the illustrative sample.



Students recognise the commitment of their teachers, not just in providing feedback but in their demonstrated dedication to their student's learning or to teaching more generally. Commitment was the most frequently referenced quality, and is identified by students as distinct from the physical provision of Time (see The Nature of Feedback, section 4.1.1) as a more values-based idea, exhibited in the use of language describing the teacher as 'going above and beyond', 'going the extra mile' or working 'above the call of duty' and illustrated in statements such as, 'He always goes out of his way to make sure everyone in the class is okay, and is committed to helping everyone.' Students value commitment exhibited by their teacher and at times it was explicitly recognised that their teacher was exceeding reasonable expectations in terms of: meeting the needs of a large student cohort and teaching workload; academic expectations; or in comparison to other teachers. Therefore, the teachers being nominated were frequently recognised as demonstrating distinct or exceptional behaviour, which was evidence of commitment.

The second most common characteristic students used to describe teachers was Approachable. Rather than referring to tangible or physical access to the teacher, Approachable is categorised within this theme, as it refers to the way in which a teacher appears to their student exhibited by phrases such as ‘She has a very relaxed manner and I feel comfortable asking questions about feedback on my assignment.’ Personal qualities that make their teacher appear approachable and easy to talk to include being friendly, caring, kind, welcoming, fun and being good-humoured. Notably, creating fun classes and a friendly atmosphere in the classroom were central to the teacher being perceived as approachable. Fostering this environment in the classroom is significant. Explicit statements in the nomination data indicate that students are more likely to feel welcomed in asking questions, in seeking explanation of difficult concepts and in discussing their learning or seeking opportunities to discuss their feedback, when a teacher demonstrates to students that they are approachable. It is evident in the nomination data that students value when their teachers display characteristics such as Commitment and being Approachable, which shape the teacher-student relationship and therefore the dynamic within the feedback process.

In this report, the feedback-focused and general nomination data have been considered collectively. However, there was a difference between the two types of data in terms of the Theme of Personal Qualities of the Teacher. In feedback-focused awards, nominations normally referred to Approachable and Commitment, with less reference to the broader range of personal qualities (noted in Figure 8). That Approachable and Commitment are more strongly reinforced in the feedback-focused award nominations, further suggests that the relationships surrounding feedback are valuable, and that personal qualities can positively frame the feedback dialogue.

Positive relationships surrounding the feedback process should also be two-way, and students value when their teachers are Open to Feedback. Where teachers openly seek feedback from students and appear to act on it, this indicates an open and dialogic relationship that is positively recognised by students in statements such as: ‘She openly encourages and uses feedback from students’ and ‘He always looked for feedback and acted on this to develop classes’. Nomination data referred to different ways in which teachers sought feedback, in using creative approaches to voting in large lecture halls, to seeking feedback in small group tutorials. When teachers demonstrate their willingness to seek and act on feedback this suggests a genuine commitment to their students and a shared sense of equity in the feedback process. Furthermore, it is a way of modelling positive behaviour to students in being reflective and making changes to practice informed by feedback. Similarly, when teachers are identified as Enthusiastic this is viewed positively by the student and is discussed in term of teachers being passionate or energetic in their teaching and in the way they engage with their students. Finally, displaying Empathy through understanding the experiences or concerns of students is recognised in the nomination data. This is not only related to situations when students face significant challenges, but is also demonstrated in more subtle ways in teacher appreciation or understanding of difficulties associated with challenging topics or assignments, supporting students in understanding what is required within an assessment, and helping them to overcome challenges in their learning.

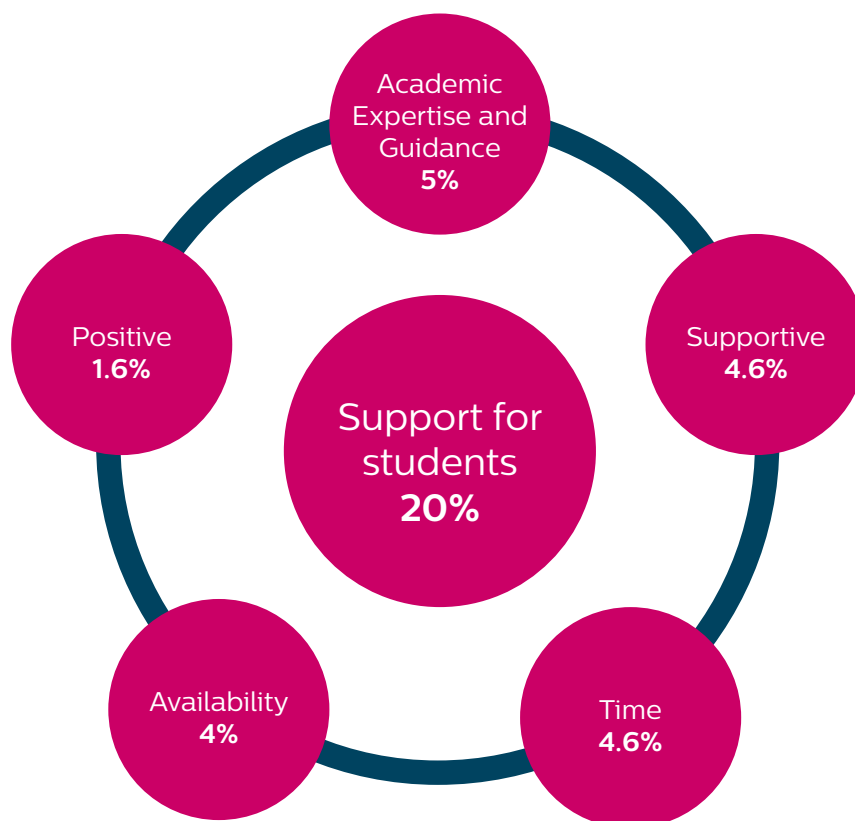
4.2.2 Personal Qualities of the Teacher: Key issues for discussion

- Consider opportunities to exhibit your passion and commitment to your subject area. How can you impart your enthusiasm to your students and engage students in the subject?
- Explore opportunities to engage students in dialogue on the feedback process. Can this be done with different class or assessment formats? To what extent is support provided to develop assessment and feedback literacies?
- Appreciate and recognise the challenges that students may face and that you are a source of care. Reflect on your own experiences of study and how you felt receiving feedback on assessments. How can you translate this experience to your own teaching?
- Personal qualities are noticed by students; displaying a sense of humour and being friendly were noted as two key personal qualities making teachers appear approachable. What personal qualities enable you to build rapport and to connect with your students?
- Reflect on how approachable you seem to your students. Are there opportunities for informal discussion with students? Are you open to their feedback? What are the opportunities for student feedback throughout the module?
- In many cases, students recognised commitment as exceptional considering teacher workload and numbers of students. Teachers can manage student expectations by clearly stating their own expectations and manageable commitment to feedback in terms of process and timescales.

4.3.1 Support for Students

One of the three main themes in the nomination data was the focus on support for students as provided by teachers and the effort involved in providing that support. While not explicitly linked to feedback, this is worthy of reflection in terms of the recognition of this theme by students in their nominations (see Figure 9).

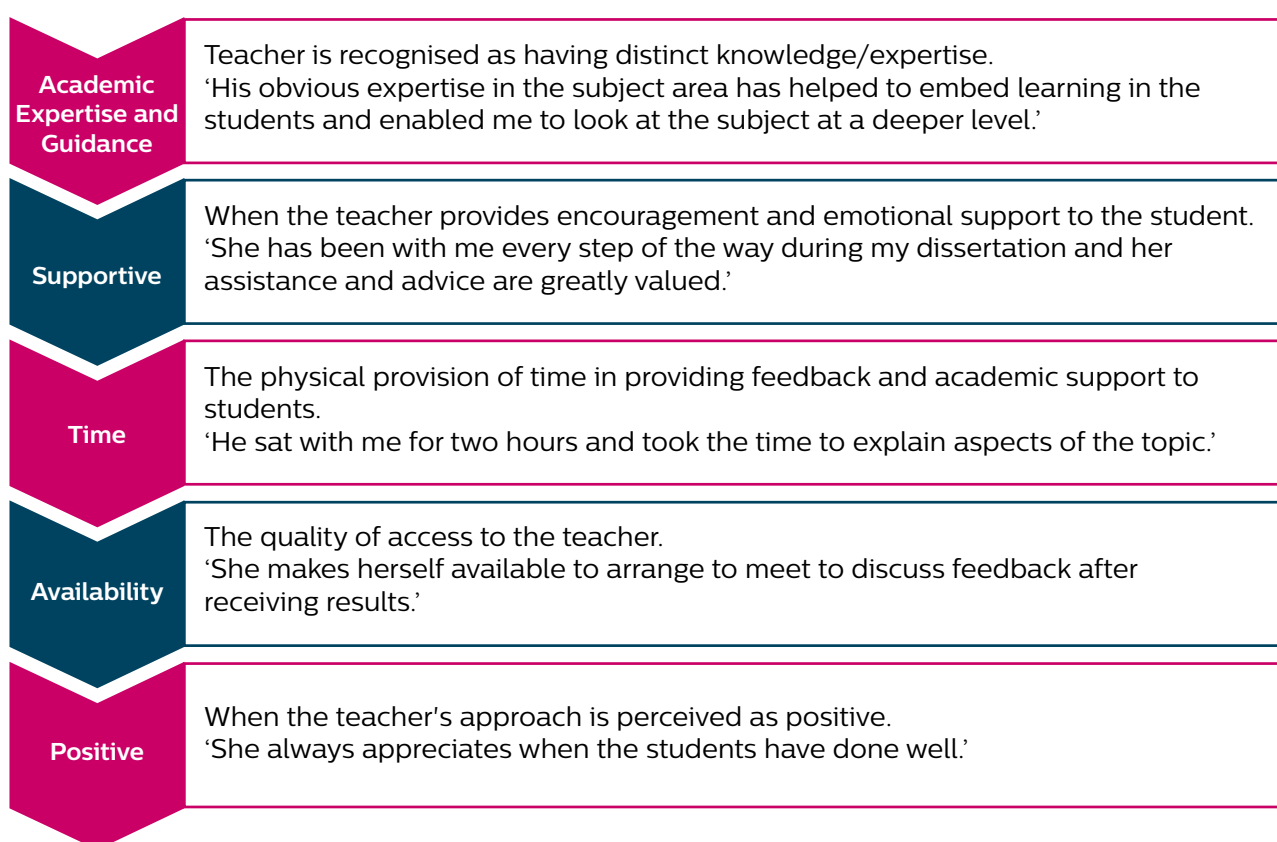
Figure 9. Theme: Support for Students



Support provided by teachers was discussed in terms of the type and features of that support. Students referred to tutors who provided Academic Expertise and Guidance, when teachers are recognised as having subject or discipline expertise which is used to develop student learning. This expertise positively benefits students who refer to: being provided with new and up-to-date readings; being prompted to consider areas of exploration exposing them to developments in the discipline or profession; and refining assessment topic ideas in dialogue with their teacher. Academic Expertise and Guidance is not limited to assessment, but can include the student's engagement with the discipline or subject area more broadly, therefore shaping formative feedback beyond assessment. Students recognise this type of support scaffolds their journey in becoming a member of an academic or professional community. This type of academic support sits alongside more general references to teachers as Supportive, where students acknowledge encouragement and even emotional support they have received: 'She has been with me every step of the way during my dissertation and her assistance and advice are greatly valued.' In such statements, students recognise their teacher has been a source of support and guidance during their studies and this is commonly discussed in terms of being reliable and constant as evidenced in phrases commenting on the teacher as offering support 'every step of the way'.

Another dimension to the support provided by teachers is in the provision of Time. For students, the effort of their teacher is evident in the perceptible provision of time as recognised in statements such as: ‘He sat with me for two hours and took the time to explain aspects of the topic I was struggling to understand for my assignment.’ Students recognise the time invested by their teachers to provide feedback, whether that be meeting with students to discuss feedback or the time taken in providing written feedback. Students frequently noted effort provided by their teacher as ‘substantial’ and sometimes with acknowledgement of the workload implications for teachers in supporting large numbers of students, including teachers providing feedback ‘in their own time’. This points to the need for clear expectation setting around the time commitment of teachers in providing feedback.

Figure 10. Definitions and illustrative examples for codes within theme of Support for Students



As well as Time, students referred to Availability of their teacher, understood as the quality of access to their teacher. Similar to the way students referred to Time in the nomination data, there was a physical and tangible dimension to this, reflecting the way students recognised access to support: ‘She makes herself available to arrange to meet to discuss feedback after receiving results.’ Clearly students value when teachers make themselves available to discuss feedback after assignments are marked, as well as before submission, but this is also discussed in more general terms when students express feeling supported when their teachers respond quickly to emails and are easily contactable. The legitimacy of strong communication and easy contact with teachers is central to students feeling supported and this underpins the access the student has to their teacher to engage in dialogue over feedback, which is a likely reason for students referring to support in nominations related to feedback.

There is a recognised importance in 'being able' to arrange meetings to discuss assessment; that students can contact their teacher related to assessment or feedback; and that the teacher is responsive to broader requests for support. There are references to specific time periods such as 'evenings and weekends' and consistency of availability which again points to the need for clear communication to students on teacher availability, to shape realistic student expectations in line with teacher workload and acknowledging working hours.

Finally, students also noted support which was positive and providing praise for their efforts as encouraging and something which they value. In the nomination statements students acknowledged when positive support was provided among more critical feedback or during periods where the student was experiencing difficulties.

4.3.2 Support for Students: Key issues for discussion

- Students value academic guidance that includes inspiring them and keeping them up-to-date with relevant research, developments and activities in the discipline, field or profession. In what ways can research-teaching or teaching-practice links be strengthened?
- Can there be explicit expectation setting and communication of boundaries to students about working hours, availability and anticipated response times? This could go beyond outlining physical time limits but also exploring expectations and communicating those to students around the likely amount and type of feedback provided at different levels of study.
- Is there scope to explore common departmental or programme approaches to student contact and teacher availability?
- Students appreciate when their teachers are available for discussion before, during and after assessments. Could and should this contact time be more formalised or organised? Should this vary at different levels of study?
- How could you support a community of practice to cultivate support for students in joining an academic community? Could this be peer-led? Across levels of study?

5. Consistency

Throughout the nomination data, and across the sample, the importance of consistency was articulated by students and was identified most obviously in the use of the word 'always'. It was connected with all three themes beyond just the nature of feedback, for example, referring to a teacher as 'always providing detailed feedback' and when considering support to students, for example, 'always made themselves available'. Consistency is important for students to: identify predictable and clear expectations of educational experience and support; understand their relationship with their teachers; and consider their responsibilities as self-directed learners. This again points to the significance of working to ensure continuity of experience and exploring opportunities for module and programme level consistency so that a student has comparable feedback experience across different levels of study and with different teachers.

6. Conclusion

To explore student perceptions of good feedback, this study has reviewed nomination data from SLTAs in the Scottish higher education sector. Data from ten HEIs was analysed, with data coded so as to identify key themes. A sample of data was analysed further to identify the weighting attributed to different themes.

While there are caveats expressed related to the nature of the nomination data within the SLTA process, there is a prominent theme of 'forward-orientated' as one of the most acknowledged aspects of good feedback within this data. From this it is evident that there is student recognition of feedback that supports the student's ability to develop, with the emphasis on forward-oriented feedback sitting alongside a focus on feedback that enhances the students' ability to understand their performance - what they have done well and what was weaker in their assessments - as well as the different methods of providing feedback. Regarding methods of feedback, student commentary on this area recognised the different ways and contexts in which they received feedback but with mixed focus on both the use of technology as well as different ways in which teachers sought to engage their students in the feedback process before, during and after assessments.

The study exposes less of an emphasis on issues of turnaround, in terms of time taken to return or provide feedback to students and quantity. However, the way turnaround is discussed is frequently in subjective terms – such as stating that feedback was ‘prompt’ – raising a need for clear setting of expectations, as well as references to turnaround which is timely and potentially of more use to the student in developing their work. This again reinforced forward-orientated feedback is a priority for students. The time and physical effort provided by teachers, and teacher availability, could be linked to turnaround and are key themes in the feedback nomination data which similarly point to the issue of clear setting of student expectations, as well as exploration of consistency across modules and programmes. This is further reinforced by the references to consistency throughout the sample in relation to all three of the main themes, indicating the importance students ascribe to this.

The focus in this study was perceptions of good feedback, however, the nomination data clearly signposts the importance of the personal qualities of teachers and the nature of support provided to students. These emerged as key themes in the nomination data which are related to, influence and set the context for good feedback as exhibited in comments more focused on the nature of feedback. The relationships that teachers build with their students, and the ways they engage and support students in their learning, clearly influence the way in which students feel they are welcomed and supported in participating in dialogic feedback. From the SLTA nomination data, good feedback takes multiple forms, is provided at different stages in the assessment process, goes beyond the assessments to include other dimensions of the student experience, and is enhanced when provided in a positive, open and supported relationship between the tutor and their students.

7. Areas for future consideration

The report concludes with key issues for discussion for students' associations and higher education institutions. These will be discussed at the [Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee](#) in autumn 2018 where decisions on action arising from the research will take place.

Students' Associations

- Analysis of institutional SLTA data could be used to help develop student association policy and engage students in a culture of learning and teaching enhancement.
- While each students' association runs its award independently, there could be merit in cross-sector sharing of practice in approaches to running SLTA schemes and the type of data collected. It is likely that not all students' associations will have the resource to analyse the SLTA data and so participating in a cross-sector community of practice could be a useful source of support.
- As well as providing peer support in developing SLTAs, a cross-sector network or community of practice, potentially embedded within the Enhancement Theme work in Scotland, could support the development of a shared evidence base across the sector. Within this study, while there were some similarities in the data received from students' associations, there were also many inconsistencies which prevented the opportunity for a more detailed cross-sector comparative analysis, for example, to consider whether conceptions of good feedback vary in discipline areas, in distance versus campus-based study, and taking into account differences between those nominated (such as demographic details). If there was a willingness among students' associations, some consistency in data collection could allow a deeper level of analysis and enable students' associations to strengthen policy in this area.
- Students' Associations may want to consider the use of open questions within nomination forms as a way of accessing student perspectives on good teaching and support.
- The quality of the nomination data means that with appropriate permissions this could be a valuable resource in the design of teaching staff development. This could provide a platform for more collaborative working in learning and teaching enhancement between the students' association and the institution.
- Similarly, the rich nomination statements provide an insight into student perceptions of good practice which could be used to complement end of module evaluations.

- This research indicates that good quality feedback is commonly provided within positive, open and supportive relationships between teachers and students. This presents a challenge in contexts where teachers have large student groups. Similarly, while students value detailed feedback that enhances their understanding of performance and supports their future performance, there is a potential challenge in meeting expectations in terms of providing this promptly after the assessment deadline. Fostering and sustaining feedback dialogue requires teachers having the capacity to build relationships and invest time in feedback. Institutions need to consider the best approaches to workload allocation and teaching group sizes, as well as providing the space for innovative and creative approaches to assessment and feedback whether that be incorporating the use of technology to provide feedback (such as audio or video feedback), or exploring different contexts in which feedback can be provided (such as in group feedback in lectures and group feedback in tutorials). How can this debate be taken forward within your institution?
- Consistency of experience is important to students. Clear communication of assessment criteria, types of feedback and turnaround times are vital. In many cases, students recognised commitment as exceptional and considered this in terms of numbers of students and workload, so there is a case to be made for clear expectation management of the feedback process. How is this done currently? What could be improved?
- Similarly, programme-level consistency is important so that a student has comparable feedback experience across different levels of study and with different teachers, and so that the student can look to implement the feedback in other aspects of their study beyond a particular piece of assessment or module. Exploring programme focused assessment could be another opportunity to strengthen student engagement with feedback.
- The SLTA nomination data is a rich source of evidence within the students' association. Could the university explore working in partnership with the students' association to support an analysis of the data? This could inform the enhancement of learning and teaching, and staff development.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1. List of institutions and sample used to identify weighting of codes

In exploring the value of different aspects of feedback, the analysis includes identification of the weighting of different themes. To explore the weighting of themes, data from the most recent SLTA award year provided by each students' association was used as an illustrative sample from the larger data set.

Organisation label SLTA01	Sample year	Feedback-focused award category	Number of nominations in sample (Total number = 319)
SLTA01	2017	No	72
SLTA02	2017	Yes	10
SLTA03	2017	No	16
SLTA04	2018	Yes	39
SLTA05	2018	No	10
SLTA06	2017	Yes	9
SLTA07	2018	No	79
SLTA08	2018	Yes	10
SLTA09	2018	Yes	20
SLTA10	2018	Yes	54

Theme	Code label	Definition	Illustrative example	Weighting of code within sample
Personal Quality of the Teacher	Approachable	The teacher appears as friendly and easy to talk to.	He has a very relaxed manner and I feel comfortable asking about feedback on my assignment.	8%
Personal Quality of the Teacher	Committed	The teacher appears as dedicated to the students through quality of feedback, teaching or in a broader general sense.	He always goes out of his way to make sure he relates to everyone in his class and he really cares about our work.	10.2%
Personal Quality of the Teacher	Empathy	The teacher has demonstrated the ability to understand and share the feelings of the student.	She manages to discuss my assignments in a kind, understanding way, no matter what the problem is with them, so I leave her office feeling better about them.	1.6%
Personal Quality of the Teacher	Enthusiastic	The teacher displays an eagerness and passion in their teaching approaches.	He is clearly passionate about his subject.	3%
Personal Quality of the Teacher	Open to Feedback	The teacher is soliciting and/or acts upon feedback received from students.	She openly encourages and uses feedback from students.	3.1%
Support for Students	Availability	The quality of access to the teacher.	She makes herself available to arrange to meet to discuss feedback after receiving results.	4%
Support for Students	Academic Expertise and Guidance	The student recognises benefitting from expertise/discipline knowledge of the teacher.	His obvious expertise in the subject has helped to embed learning and has enabled me to look at the subject at a deeper level.	5%
Support for Students	Time	The physical provision/investment of time by the teacher in providing feedback and academic support to the student.	He sat with me for two hours and took time to explain aspects of the topic I was struggling to understand for my assignment.	4.8%
Support for Students	Positive	When the teacher's approach is perceived as positive.	She always appreciates when the students have done well.	1.6%

Theme	Code label	Definition	Illustrative example	Weighting of code within sample
Support for Students	Supportive	When the teacher provides encouragement and emotional support to the student.	She has been with me every step of the way during my dissertation and her assistance and advice are greatly valued.	4.6%
Nature of Feedback	Balanced	When the feedback is acknowledged by the student as demonstrating fair judgement.	He always provides honest and fair feedback.	1.8%
Nature of Feedback	Detailed	When the feedback is thorough and comprehensive.	She always provided detailed and in-depth feedback.	5%
Nature of Feedback	*Clarity	When the feedback provides lucidity of understanding.	Her feedback helped me to understand what I could have done better in the assignment.	2.9%
Nature of Feedback	*Clear	When the feedback is easily understood by the student and is not ambiguous.	His feedback was always very clear.	1.6%
Nature of Feedback	*Specific/ Focused	When the feedback is precise and specific rather than generic.	She never makes general umbrella comments but always makes comments that focus on specific statements and points made in my assignments.	1%
Nature of Feedback	*Insightful	When the feedback is considered by the student to provide a deeper level of understanding of the topic.	The feedback provided good insight into current research that has helped with the direction of my own research.	0.4%
Nature of Feedback	*Reflection	When feedback encourages the student to reflect on their performance.	We were encouraged to submit a self-evaluation template along with our assignment and we used this to reflect on our feedback.	0.2%
Nature of Feedback	Method	The practical method by which feedback is received.	Although we get electronic feedback he is very keen that we arrange individual face-to-face appointments to discuss our feedback.	4.8%

Theme	Code label	Definition	Illustrative example	Weighting of code within sample
Nature of Feedback	Personalised	When comments in the feedback demonstrate the teacher's engagement with the student as an individual, and are highly personalised.	Her feedback is individualised to each student rather than using generic comments.	0.9%
Nature of Feedback	Quality	When a generic statement is made regarding the standard of feedback.	She always provided excellent feedback.	3.2%
Nature of Feedback	Quantity	When a generic statement is made regarding the amount of feedback.	She gives extensive feedback on essays.	2%
Nature of Feedback	Turnaround	Time taken to provide feedback.	Feedback was always available promptly after the submission date	1.6%
Nature of Feedback	Valuable	The feedback directly influences the overall outcome of the experience for the student and the student recognises it as beneficial to their aspirations.	The feedback provided has been valuable to my performance in both modules.	1.6%
Nature of Feedback	**Constructive	When the feedback supports future action by identifying areas requiring development and actions to improve future achievement.	The feedback was a great help for future assignments and the calibre of work I submit.	15.9%
Nature of Feedback	**Motivational	When the feedback/teacher motivates a student to identify and achieve a goal.	Her communication skills, passion for the subject and competence as a lecturer are so inspiring and have influenced my determination to become a teacher.	5%
Nature of Feedback	**Self-efficacy	When the feedback/teacher instils in the student a belief in their abilities.	If it wasn't for the helpful feedback comments in my assignments I would be feeling more nervous about the exams	2.5%
Nature of Feedback	Consistency	Reference to behaviour which does not vary greatly.	She always makes herself available to discuss feedback	4.4%

*Aggregated code: Enhanced Understanding of Performance

** Aggregated code: Forward-oriented

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