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## **Feedback for Learning Development: Tourism students' perspective**

### **Abstract**

The process of providing feedback is core to teaching and learning. However, literature infers that good feedback can get lost in translation. This study responds to this issue by exploring the nexus between feedback and Learning Development with tourism students at a British university. The study focuses on how students perceive and digest feedback to enhance their learning; addressing student concern. The findings reveal that students have mixed perceptions and are concerned with timescales, inconsistencies and the clarity of assessment criteria, which relate to their personal learning style. Practical implementations are presented to enrich learning materials from a student perspective.

### **Key words**

Learning development; feedback; communication; student perception

### **1.0 Introduction**

Since the 1990s, it has been recognised in order for undergraduates to reach their full academic potential, they need to be equipped with the skills necessary for Higher Education (HE) (Skillen, Merten, Trivett and Percy, 1998). Learning Development (LD) programmes have become recognised as an effective means of administering the transition into HE for undergraduates (Skillen *et al.*, 1998; Bannano and Jones, 2007). Although this research reviews the field of LD as a whole, additional focus is placed on the major themes associated with feedback processes within it. This is topical, as LD has emerged 'as a result of competing agendas and turbulent times' (Winter, Barton, Allison & Cotton 2015:2) in HE, at the same time that students consistently rate feedback as dissatisfactory within their institution (ALTC, 2009; Biggs and Tang, 2011; National Student Survey, 2005 – 2011).

From an academic perspective, the process of providing feedback is deemed as being 'bread and butter to teaching and learning' (Boud 2000:155). Therefore, the only rationale for student dissatisfaction can be that good feedback gets lost in translation between the teacher and student (Rodgers 2006). However, as a teacher, directed by the QAA general principles (Rust 2002) to provide appropriate feedback (principle 12), it is crucial to develop an understanding about student practice. Once understood, the knowledge can then enrich learning materials, and ensure that feedback is communicated in the most effective way for students to digest.

Therefore, this paper aims to understand feedback, and to develop a learner-centred approach that is underpinned by LD (Hilsdon 2010). The nexus between feedback and LD is therefore explored, and the nature of this connection is assessed through a number of objectives. The objectives are to determine the student perceptions of and concerns over the feedback process, to determine how students use feedback to develop their learning by determining the impact of feedback on student LD, and finally, to develop good teaching practice to enhance LD and teaching, from a student perspective.

## **2.0 Literature review**

### **2.1 Learning Development**

It has long been accepted there are differing terminologies and views into the definition of LD. Reviewing the literature, it is apparent there are three distinct perspectives which could be adopted: a skill (Northedge, 2005; Race, 2007) distinct as a symptom of autonomous learning; a tool of academic functions and practice (Wisker and Brown 1996; Gibbs, 1988; Cash and Hilsdon 2008; Hilsdon, 2011; Scouller, 1992); or, a process (Brandes and Ginnis, 1991; Gibbs, 1992; Lea and Street, 1998; Cottrell, 2001; Skillen *et al.*, 1998; ATLC, 2009) which focuses learning efforts upon the student.

Underpinning these definitions is: students, academics, tools, guidance and balance. Amongst these emerging themes are also a collection of terminologies used to describe the features of LD, each with subtle differences: autonomous learning, independent learning, deep and surface learning as well as self-directed learning; with this in mind, LD could be viewed from a teaching perspective (self-directed) or from a student's (autonomous and independent). However, for the purposes of this paper, LD is viewed as a process. A process can be dynamic and interactive, and account for a range of learning styles as discussed by Huang and Busby (2007), which every student has when arriving at tertiary institutions (Race 2007, Northedge, 2005). More specifically, the process can include students as self-directed learners, and acknowledge the learning material that lecturers utilise to support learning. This definition would also construct LD skills as being both an inherited capability, and something that can be acquired by students. Therefore, by viewing LD as a practice the varying range of learning processes (Miller and Parlett, 1974; York and Knight, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002) can be accounted for, and a student-centred approach to learning can be taken, to replicate the more recent understandings of LD which has evolved over the years (ALDHE, 2012; Learn Higher, 2012).

Most early approaches to student learning adopted a 'do nothing' attitude, where it was assumed literacy skills and conventions of a discipline area could be taught through a process of osmosis (Baldauf, 1997). Skillen *et al.* (1998) reported past approaches to student learning did not properly facilitate the transition into HE. Even previous models of LD still assumed only selected students needed help or could develop skills for tertiary institutions (Skillen and Manhony, 1997; Skillen *et al.* 1998). However, since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in the issues associated with student learning at HE (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005); leading to the recognition that in order to adapt undergraduates to their new environment, there is a need to improve literacy and learning skills for all (Drury and Webb, 1990; Golebiowski, 1997); thus the 'IDEALL' approach was introduced which acknowledged this gap (McKinney, Wood, Little, 2009; ALDHE, 2012; Skillen *et al.* 1998).

Studies have proven that without suitable guidance to develop autonomous learning, many candidates will not reach their full academic potential (Skillen and Mahony, 1997). Hence the role of feedback in the LD process is to inform a student about *their* current level of understanding and to guide them for future assessments through their HE experience. In fact, many researchers argue the feedback presented based on an assessment is most central to learning (Carless, 2006; ALTC, 2009; Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon, 2011; Butler and Winne, 1995). However, many researchers note that students who do not have the adequate skills for university are often overwhelmed by the unfamiliar professional context, regardless of any history of academic success (Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; Taylor, 1997; Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs, 1997; Reid, 2010). Therefore, it is questioned how students perceive and use feedback, and if it is effectively digested (from an academic perspective) to develop *their* learning. Evidence of this student-centred learning approach is commonly found in the more recent understandings of LD (ALDHE, 2012; Learn Higher, 2012), however, LD is centred on the student, and that can lead to the suggestion that there are a number of factors that affect the application of LD towards its goal of encouraging autonomous learning. Students therefore need to be taught how to take ownership over what they learn (Lublin and Prosser, 1994; Keenan, 2011).

Thorpe's (2000) theory for independent learning suggested there are three perspectives which require a balance between guidance and candidates' own work, these are experimental learning, perspective transformation and cognitive monitor and meta-learning. Whilst some researchers support the idea of independent learning being the backbone to success, many argue it is a combination of personal attributes that affect a student's ability to develop autonomous learning skills (Higgins, 2000; Wickens, Forbes and Tribe, 2006; Tett, Hounsell, Chrisite, Cree and McCune, 2012). However, it is unclear from Liu and Carless' (2006) findings, if students acknowledge they have a responsibility in developing these lifelong learning skills. Even though Liu and Carless' (2006) research was very comprehensive, it did not investigate how much ownership students take for their own learning. These studies into independent learning suggest enhancing the development of this skill in students is a complex issue and overall determined by the motivation of the individual (Tyler, 1949).

## **2.2 Feedback**

Feedback can be defined as 'all feedback exchanges generated within assessment design, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context, being overt or covert (actively and/or passively sought and/or received), and importantly, drawing from a range of sources' (King 2013:71). Consequently, giving good feedback is imperative in HE, and many researchers support the seven principles to providing good feedback outlined by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (2009).

Feedback should be meaningful, provide opportunities for reflection and offer further advice (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury 1997). Feedback should be timely (Beaumont *et al.* 2011) and engaging, to ensure the information is absorbed by the student (Bloxha and Boyd 2007). Feedback should also be provided on three separate occasions (Beaumont *et al.* 2011), regardless of the type of assessment, in order to enhance a student's chance of developing their learning in a HE institution. The three occasions are: preparatory guidance; in-task guidance; and, performance feedback (Beaumont *et al.* 2008). This 'Dialogic Feedback Cycle', offered by Beaumont *et al.* (2008), supports the notion that LD is a 'process' and the

varied approach to providing feedback also accounts for the various learning processes found within HE institutions.

For students to develop as learners, the concept of providing feedforward is also commonly denoted as a constructive method and considered to be productive for students (Frey and Fisher, 2011; Orsmond, 2002; Higgins *et al.* 2001; Tett *et al.* 2012; Bloxha and Boyd, 2007; Pitts 2005). Feedforward provides candidates with explicit instructions on how to improve their performance, instead of only giving a commentary on what has been done (Conaghan and Lockey, 2009). This concept is enhanced when providing students with opportunities to submit drafts, as reported by Fisher *et al.* (2011) who observed an increase in overall results by 7.1% in an Australian University; emphasising the role of both formative and summative feedback for students. Nevertheless, formative feedback cannot subsidise the desire for verbal advice in a summative form, which according to Beaumont *et al.* (2011) accounts for 71% of students (Pitts, 2005; Taylor, 1997). Discussions, clarifications and negotiation between student and tutor improves the feedback process as it also offers an opportunity for the assessor to adjust their methods in providing it (Higgins *et al.* 2001; Bloxha and Boyd, 2007; Chanock 2000). In addition, demonstrating examples of excellent work complements definitions of an assessment, and clarifies any feedforward presented to the student (Miller *et al.* 1998; Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong 2011; Chanock, 2000).

However, from a student perspective, all feedback is not acknowledged as a tool to improving their learning. Often, when provided in a verbal context, feedback is overlooked or its value is unappreciated (Brown, Gibbs and Glover, 2003; Blair, Orr and Yorke, 2012). When students are presented with a grade as part of summative feedback, students often ignored the comments provided (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002; Butler, 1988; York and Knight, 2004). This ignorance often occurs when performance feedback is given (Beaumont *et al.* 2008), as research has proven grading systems often discourage students to pursue independent learning, or expand on their knowledge into their area of discipline (Knapper and Cropley, 2000; York and Knight 2004). Instead, providing grades focuses students on improving their mark, rather than their understanding of a subject (Butler, 1988; Boud, 2000). As such, studies suggest students are particularly unfamiliar with the process of formative feedback in HE. Taylor (1997) established students are more experienced in using summative as it is common practice at secondary education. Nevertheless, Beaumont *et al.* (2011) acknowledge a student's desire for formative feedback.

One reaction to this ignorance, from academics, is to remove grades from the summative feedback and only provide grades to students once they have responded to their feedback (Butler, 1988; Higgins *et al.* 2002; Bloxha and Boyd, 2007; Black and William, 1998). This has the potential to encourage the final aspect of the feedback loop (Beaumont *et al.* 2008), whereby feedback should be reviewed and fed forward to future assessments. Nonetheless, the research put forward by these studies fails to establish the impact of removing grades; thus does not prove if this is a correct premise of how feedback is assimilated and when considering Carless' (2006) study, it wrongly assumes the weight of concern to students. So caution is required.

Interestingly, research put forward by Hounsell (1997) and Orsmond (2002) suggest students express difficulty in reflecting and evaluating on their performance, thus impacting on the feedback loop, diminishing opportunities to learn from past performance or enhance their learning. Zimmerman (2002) however stated students are rarely asked to evaluate their own work. Therefore it is possible that a lack of familiarity in this area of independent

learning restricts undergraduate's ability to criticise themselves. Therefore, it could be argued, if students are unable to evaluate their own work, feedback provided containing introspective advice will not be processed. Many studies advise implementing self and peer assessment tasks as an instrument to gaining reflective skills and giving ownership over an individual's learning (Mortimer, 1998; Taylor, 1997; Orsmond, 2002). Bloxham and Boyd (2007) expand on this idea, recommending a learning journal during self-assessment should be kept as a practical tool for students to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. These findings indicate an inability of introspect thought (a fundamental element to developing as an autonomous learner), could be the underlying cause for feedback dissatisfaction.

Student concerns with feedback are centred on the inconsistent language and lack of information provided by tutors; naming such as being the main cause for concern (Miller, Imrie and Cox, 1998; Bailey, 2009). More specifically, students are discontent with the level of detail provided (Hounsell 2007) as they want to know where they went wrong and why, with corrective advice and prioritisation on areas for improvement (Miller *et al.* 1998; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Taylor (1994) explained students not only want feedback on the completed assessment, but also their initial planning. Poor feedback is also considered as an obstacle to developing students as autonomous learners (Black and William, 1998; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Knapper and Copley, 2000; Boud, 2000; Miller and Parlett, 1974). Furthermore, it has also been recognised that the goals of an assessment are not always articulated fully, and it is then only assumed that assessment criteria will be correctly translated to students (Higgins *et al.* 2001; Lauritz, 2003).

These interpretations of how feedback should be and is digested, demonstrates there is a clear disparity between what is understood by the teacher and student, and often teachers believed their feedback is more useful than the students do (Beaumont *et al.* 2011; Carless, 2006). For example, the assessor sees feedback as a tool for self-development, through verbal and written comments to improve work, whereas, student perception of the feedback process causes initial advice, which was provided to enhance learning, to be overlooked or unappreciated. Furthermore, it is argued that a lack of initial understanding of the assessment criteria causes the disparity between the student and lecturer's interpretations of the comments provided (Hounsell, 1997; Hendry *et al.* 2011). As a result, the purpose and process of digesting feedback needs to be evaluated further, to highlight the extent and nature of the gap in communication between staff and students. After all, feedback is only effective if the student engages with the process (Thorpe 2000) and it could be argued that unless feedback is perceived as valuable, it will not be fully utilised to improve student learning. Furthermore, it could be argued even if students are educated on the processes of feedback in tertiary institutions, it cannot acknowledge the different preferences, expectations and learning styles every student has (Lublin and Prosser 1994; Higgins, 2000; Miller and Parlett, 1974). Nor should it, because research shows that 'children do not process information more effectively when they are educated according to their preferred learning style' (Dekker, Lee, Howard-Jones and Jolles, 2012:2). Furthermore, Fisher *et al.* (2011) concludes that lecturers need to have better recognised standards for marking, aimed at cultivating learning not just measuring it. Hence, it is the communication of assessments, and the feedback process that needs to be addressed in order to improve the skills required for HE.

Understanding student concerns and determining why students perceive the feedback process as being consistently unsatisfactory (ALTC, 2009; Biggs and Tang, 2011; National Student Survey, 2005 – 2011) is therefore of importance. By identifying the key concerns with feedback, as perceived by the student, the teacher will be able to adapt learning material to

ensure LD is fulfilled in HE. The teacher will also be able to offer preparatory guidance (including LD material) to students, which may be key in reducing these apparent misinterpretations (O'Donovan *et al.* 2004). In particular, it will enable feedback to assume the role of enhancing a student's chance of developing their learning in a HE institution (Beaumont *et al.* 2008) as the barriers perceived by students may be removed. However, in order to understand the effectiveness of the 'Dialogic feedback model' (Beaumont *et al.* 2011) to resolving the issues associated with the feedback process, it needs to be tested through a practical application. Testing this model will highlight where the disparity is between lecturers' comments and students' interpretation of the feedback provided; something which this paper aims to achieve.

### **3.0 Research methods**

The study developed an inductive, qualitative approach towards data collection. This approach allowed for knowledge to be drawn from the research process, rather than infer findings from the start. Two stages of data collection were completed for this investigation: the focus groups were designed to inform the questionnaire for the in-depth interviews, while the in-depth interviews were administered to determine student perceptions and use of feedback and their concerns over the feedback process.

After an initial pilot focus group with postgraduate tourism students to test the role and purpose of the focus group discussions two focus groups with 2<sup>nd</sup> and final year tourism students were completed, acting as a fact-finding stage of data collection (Veal 1992). These focus groups allowed students to raise their concerns with the feedback process and applied the informal and in-depth interview approach to groups of people rather than the individual (Veal 2006). Probing was permitted during the focus group sessions, as the question *why* was crucial to the investigation. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the feedback practices and to allow for student perceptions, concerns, and use of feedback material to surface in an informal environment.

Each focus group comprised of six student representatives from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and final year tourism students groups from within the tourism department. During the focus groups, the research assistant acted as the facilitator of the group discussion rather than an interviewer (Veal 2006), and the nature of the discussions allowed the respondents to interact with each other. The focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed by an independent body as well, to ensure anonymity and to allow the researcher to analyse and evaluate student responses before the second stage of data collection.

Once the data were analysed, in-depth interviews were completed with 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and final year tourism students, to explore in more detail the specific ways in which students digest feedback. Qualitative interviews were employed as they were considered as being the most renowned form of qualitative research, characterised by the length, depth and structure of analysis (Veal, 1997, Mason, 2002, Marshall and Rossman, 1999, Hollinshead, 2004, Fontana and Frey, 1998).

The students were encouraged to recall their truthful experiences of the feedback process from within the tourism department, and to explain how they personally digested the feedback that they had received. The aim was to explore the facts and themes which emerged from the focus groups, and to ensure that student perceptions of, concerns with and use of

feedback were discussed. In total 16 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and final year tourism students. The interviews were conducted by a neutral partner, who made contact via email and arranged the location, date and timing of each interview. As the interviews were conducted in a neutral location, and at a time and date that suited the students who participated, uptake was higher than in the focus group stage. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed before data analysis was undertaken.

Data were analysed using the Framework Method (Ritchie and Spencer 1994; Brunt 1997). This enabled good, systematic, qualitative analysis to be undertaken (Teo 1994; Brunt 1997), and allowed for themes to be inductively reconsidered and reworked through the process of ‘sifting, charting and sorting’ (Teo 1994: 177). In total, there were five interconnected stages to the framework method which were considered, as identified by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) and Brunt (1997): familiarisation; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and, mapping and interpretation.

#### 4.0 Findings and discussion

The main theme of this paper is to assess the nexus between feedback and LD. The aim being: to understand how students perceive and use feedback to enhance their own learning, by developing a learner-centred approach that is underpinned by LD. Students were also encouraged to share their personal concerns with the feedback process. For that reason, the findings are structured in 3 sections, before the recommendations for best practice are presented in section 5.

#### 4.1 Student perceptions of feedback

Student perception of feedback was discussed during data collection. The findings reveal that tourism students have mixed perceptions of the feedback process, but on the whole they remained largely positive about the practices that underpin the process at a British university.

Perceptions of, and preferences for, feedback varied amongst the respondents. Perceptions differed in accordance to the specific degree classification and stage of study. Unsurprisingly, these differences are rationalised through the variety of teaching styles and assessment techniques implemented within the university for tourism students. Preferences for feedback were, however, determined by the stage of study of each respondent. Preferences moved from formal written comments in stage one to casual face-to-face interactions and verbal feedback with teachers in the final stage (Table 1). One student went so far as to state that providing written comments was important as it functioned as a permanent record for any advice received. Such differences are a reflection of the various learning processes and expectations each student has (Lublin and Prosser 1994; Higgins, 2000; Miller and Parlett, 1974). Therefore, it is argued that when providing feedback it should be fluid to adapt to the differing preferences and learning styles that are discussed by Huang and Busby (2007) and employed by students. After all, students are not a homogenous group, thus feedback should reflect the differing preferences and expectations to encourage student pedagogy.

Stage 1	Formal written feedback	<i>“I think written feedback... because I can keep it and I can like, like in next year, and look to my this year’s feedbacks and I will know what mistakes I have done and that’s why”</i>
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		<i>“More sort of in-depth written feedback if you could that would be, well for me, most valuable”</i>
Stage 2	Written and verbal feedback	<i>“If it’s kind of combined oral and written feedback would be better. Because sometimes a written feedback is not very clear”</i> <i>[Verbal] “because it’s very personalised rather than being very generic”</i>
Final year	Informal verbal feedback	<i>“I think verbal is most useful for me. And informative feedbacks are helpful...[because] if you have the feedback face to face then if you don’t understand you can just ask it”</i>

Table 1: Student preference for feedback

#### 4.2 Student concerns with feedback

Student concerns with the feedback process were discussed during data collection. The findings reveal that timescales and inconsistencies were two specific concerns. The main concern however, was centred upon the clarity of the criteria set, rather than the feedback produced.

Before specifically discussing these concerns, it is important to note two issues that were acknowledged during data analysis; the need for probing and the focus upon summative feedback. Despite the consistent dissatisfaction students express with feedback, the respondents were very vague in defining the causes of their dissatisfaction with the feedback process, and reflect the experiences of Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong (2011). Probing was therefore necessary during data collection. Furthermore, it became evident during data analysis that when students were appraising the feedback process they focussed their attention upon summative feedback, not formative. The findings should therefore bear this in mind when transferring knowledge to a broader population.

Students share concerns over timescales, which appear to extend beyond the university benchmark of a 20 day turnaround period for all assessments. This was evident when participants expressed their difficulty engaging with feedback when assessment deadlines clashed with one another as it limited their time available to effectively digest feedback and improve their understanding of the subject area before their next submission (Table 2).

<i>“More than two assessments needs to be set out like at different times so that...you should have like a couple of early ones at the start of the year and then gradually one by one rather than do three or four at once. And then you have to wait like a month or after Christmas or after Easter before you get your mark back. So you don’t know how well you’ve done so you can’t improve”</i>
<i>“You’d like that gap in between, where you could improve your skills”</i>
<i>“When I hand my first piece and then you have to hand two or three... I think of my first piece... I wasn’t sure how I was performing”</i>
<i>“I got a bad mark. I want to improve but I have to wait. I got bad mark so I know; because they are the same level... the second one will be bad mark. I want to improve because I have got the feedback and I have to wait almost three months to wait for my second assessment”</i>

Table 2: Student concerns with timescales

Consequently, in agreement with past studies which found the effectiveness of feedback is reduced if not received in a timely manner (Bloxa and Boyd, 2007; Beaumont *et al.*, 2011; Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2009) the planning and management of assessments deadlines should factor in the time between subsequent assessment deadlines when determining the usefulness of feedback. Beaumont *et al.* (2011) ascertained two weeks as the satisfactory timescale; however, this was not articulated by the students in this study.

Inconsistencies between assessors appeared as a student concern with feedback, alongside variations with the feedback process itself. Inconsistencies therefore included the amount of detail given, the language used and the legibility of feedback; dependant on the type of feedback that was given (Table 3). In particular it was evident that feedback which offered limited detail or hand written comments was a major factor in a student's negative perception of the feedback process within the university. More specifically, the lack of detail and the language used in feedback was also a concern.

Language and legibility of feedback	<p><i>"I think, basically, some tutorials have to improve like the writing... make it clear for us students to understand"</i></p> <p><i>"Sometimes it's [the written comments] a bit scrawly"</i></p> <p><i>"Sometimes I can't understand [what] the teacher write on the feedback"</i></p> <p><i>"Sometimes you can't read the writing. And sometimes they don't really explain it very well when they write it"</i></p> <p><i>"Because if the feedback is given by written, sometimes I cannot recognise the handwriting because I'm not English... it's like writing is indirect"</i></p>
Level of detail given	<p><i>"I found this year in the same module and that everyone's being given different feedback"</i></p> <p><i>"Some of the teachers I think go into a little bit more of detail"</i></p> <p><i>"Some people's feedback are far much more useful just because it seeks to be better... Yeah, I just find the way that they give feedback more helpful than some of the other lecturers but obviously that differs between people. But maybe if there was a standard process across the board"</i></p>

Table 3: Student concerns over inconsistencies with feedback

Such issues with feedback can inhibit a student's ability to digest comments and engage in deep learning; supporting the work of authors who have determined that ambiguous language and limited information is a fundamental cause for concern (Miller, Imrie and Cox, 1998; Bailey, 2009). Furthermore, the results from this study also seem to be consistent with other research which found students desire corrective advice which elucidates areas for improvement that extends beyond the graded assessment (Miller *et al.* 1998; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Taylor, 1994).

Nevertheless, it was the clarity of the criteria set that presented the main issue. It appeared that numerous students seek additional clarification after receiving summative feedback, where comments provided did not match their understanding of the assessment criteria or

they were unable to acknowledge feedforward. One student even highlighted areas of frustration with feedback received, during attempts to translate the assessment criteria to the grading system.

*“I think it was one assignment last year when the lecturer didn’t actually state in their proper, clear criteria and of course what he wanted us to put in that. And we were asking him about this like so many times. And every time I ask him one question, the same question he gave me different answers to that which was really annoying and really frustrating... And the scoring was really low on that one from my whole group of 43 people; one person got 68% which was the highest mark which was really, really low for our group” [Stage 2 student]*

This is an area of concern as inadequate feedback restricts students’ development into autonomous learning, which in turn inhibits the consumption of introspective advice contained within the comments provided (Black and William, 1998; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Knapper and Cropley, 2000; Bound, 2000; Miller and Parlett, 1974). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that feedforward is a constructive method in providing candidates with opportunities to improve their performance, rather than offering a commentary on what has been done (Frey and Fisher, 2011; Orsmond, 2002; Higgins *et al.* 2001; Tett *et al.* 2012; Bloxha and Boyd, 2007; Pitts 2005; Conaghan and Lockey, 2009). Therefore, it is suggested that examples of excellent work need to be provided to students for clarification purposes and to prevent misinterpretation of feedforward (Miller *et al.* 1998; Hendry *et al.* 2011; Chanock, 2000), with both explicit and tacit explanations being provided to prevent dissatisfaction with feedback (O’Donovan *et al.*, 2004).

These findings support the notion that misconceptions generated from the assessment objectives cause a disparity between the student interpretations of the comments provided by lecturers (Higgins *et al.* 2001; Lauritz, 2003; Hounsell, 1997; Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong, 2011). Compare these results with Mortimer’s (1998) study, who found students struggle to correlate the grading scheme with the assessment criteria, the findings are consistent. Furthermore, Yorke (2003), Mortimer (1998), Polanyi (1998) and O’Donovan, Price and Rust (2004) lend support to these premises, arguing students derive different meaning during the explanation of an assessment. Therefore, it is argued that dissatisfaction with feedback is in fact a side effect of initial misinterpretation of the assessment criteria rather than the content of comments provided. To overcome such issues continuous interactions should be sought with students throughout the ‘Dialogic Feedback Cycle’ as it may impact on feedback satisfaction levels (Rogers, 1961; Higgins, 2000; Lizzo, Wilson and Simons, 2002; Fairbain, 2011).

This premise presents an important implication towards the assessment processes at HE, highlighting explanations of assessment criteria should be integrate with both the ‘Preparatory’ and ‘In-Task Guidance’ stage of the feedback loop, thus collaborating ideas put forward by O’Donovan *et al.* (2004) to provide explicit and tacit explanations to reduce misinterpretations. Additionally, teachers need a grading system which cultivates learning instead of just measuring it as proposed by Miller *et al.* (1998) and Frey and Fisher (2011).

Hence, it is possible to speculate comments provided within feedback teach autonomous learning, should thus be presented in a format which accommodates the various stages of education in order for it to be properly digested by students. This paradigm is supported by Thopre (2000) who explained feedback is only effective if the student engages in the process. Therefore if students are not able to properly interpret reflective advice, its message will be

lost. According to Zimmerman (2002) students are rarely asked to evaluate their own work, thus further supporting the notion advice contained within feedback should facilitate the development of autonomous learning. If lecturers are to focus student’s learning into increasing their knowledge of a subject area, as described by Ramsden (1987), developing introspective thought should achieve this. Therefore, it is important to encourage individuals to examine Thorpe’s (2000) theory for independent learning as a tool for improving the feedback process.

### 4.3 How students use feedback

How students use and digest feedback to aid their development as self-directed learners was of interest to this project. From the findings it is evident that those students who consciously digest feedback within their learning process are those who engage with and utilise LD tools and resources. These students pronounced feedback as an insightful tool with which they could improve their literacy skills, referencing and assessment structure. Therefore, feedback can provide a platform to develop student pedagogy from, which should be explored through LD workshops to encourage students to take ownership of their learning to become self-directed learners overtime.

The purpose of feedback was acknowledged as a platform for LD (Table 4); a tool for self-development (Table 5) to improve a student’s overall academic performance. Tourism students from all stages identified feedback is a necessary tool for improving their performance on their next assessment. The strength of this association, however, became stronger as students advanced through their degree; with many second and final year students giving clear examples of where feedback had contributed to improving their understanding of the assessment process or subject area. At the same time students openly admitted to not viewing, reading or digesting feedback provided for them on summative assessments. Instead these students viewed the grade only (Table 6).

*[Feedback has] “definitely developed me because... I’ve just kept growing and growing and growing”*

*“The assignment I did, my Harvard referencing was all off. And so, having feedback on that really helped me to get a grips with it and make sure that that didn’t bring me down in that particular assignment”*

*“I have [developed] in like my ability to kind synthesise points in like assignments and things because that wasn’t something that I would do very often. Like, in the subjects I was studying before, it wasn’t the key factor of it, only in history. But yeah, and I think I’ve improved at analysing data as well rather than just kind of stating it and better at exploring it”*

Table 4: Students perceive feedback as a platform for LD

Stage 1	<p><i>“Feedback is to development and to provide something I think”</i></p> <p><i>“How well you did on your coursework and what you can do to improve this coursework”</i></p>
Stage 2	<p><i>“I’d say that it’s to identify the strengths and weaknesses in your works so that you know why you’ve been given the grade you have, and then what you need to do to improve for the next piece of coursework.”</i></p>

	<i>“Have a look and see where you went wrong so you can improve in the future.”</i>
Final year	<i>“For me especially since my reference was a really big sort of, issue for me and I got a lot of good feedback and admonishes on what to improve at”</i>
	<i>“Definitely, it helps you improve across all modules not just that one module”</i>

Table 5: Students perceive feedback as a tool for self-development

<i>“I only take a look at the mark”</i>
<i>“Because every time I go to result it, the result is not good enough. I just put the feedback aside”</i>
<i>“But if I think that I’ve got a quite good mark... I won’t bother [reading the comments]”</i>
<i>“To be honest, I don’t use it that much, because I’ve been really happy with the grades that I’ve got.. that and then just continue to do the same thing”</i>

Table 6: Students only view the grade on summative assessments

Therefore it is possible to hypothesise valuable guidance and advice provided outside the graded assessment process may often be ignored or not fully utilised by tourism students. Many researchers support this premise arguing students in general do not acknowledge all feedback as a tool for improving their learning, thus some forms of feedback are disregarded (Brown, Gibbs and Glover, 2003; Blair, Orr and Yorke, 2012). In such a case, students perceive feedback as an instrument to enhance their learning within the perimeters of the assessment procedures rather than as a tool for self-development as initially theorised within the literature review (Knapper and Cropley, 2000; York and Knight 2004), this is consistent with earlier studies which discovered feedback is often treated as a subsidiary to a grade by students, thus ignoring any potentially constructive advice (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002; Butler, 1988; York and Knight, 2004).

This also accords with earlier research which found grades are a central focus within summative feedback and often discourage students from pursuing independent learning or enhance their understanding of a subject area (Beaumont *et al.* 2008; Knapper and Cropley, 2000; York and Knight 2004; Butler, 1988; Bound, 2000). Many researchers argue grades should only be submitted once feedback has been responded to (Butler, 1988; Higgins *et al.* 2002; Bloxha and Boyd, 2007; Black and William, 1998); and whilst it is clearly evident within this study students direct their learning towards achieving a desired mark, it is wrong to assume the weight of concern without drawing accurate comparisons between an alternative feedback process (Carless, 2006).

These results are consistent with those of other research papers which recognised there is a need to improve literacy within undergraduates to adapt them into HE (Baldauf, 1997; Skillen and Manhony, 1997; O’Neill and McMahon, 2005; Drury and Webb, 1990; Golebiowski, 1997; McKinney, Wood, Little, 2009; ALDHE, 2012; Skillen *et al.* 1998). Furthermore, these findings support the premise students arrive in HE with differing standards of literacy skills and need to be equipped to recognise the expectation of tertiary institutions (Bannano and Jones, 2007; Skillen *et al.*, 1998; Shahabudin, 2009). Some of the issues that have emerged from these results relate specifically to the availability of LD programmes, although the effectiveness of these courses is questionable (Bonnano and Jones, 2007; Learn Higher, 2012; ALDHE, 2012; Learn Higher, 2012; Gibbs, 2004; Ramsden, 1987). They are

questionable due to the defined processes of LD and the extent of student engagement with LD tools, as students identified two underlying themes when discussing their progression into self-directed learners; the level of inherent skills and motivation.

LD is defined by this paper as a dynamic and interactive process that identifies students as self-directed learners and acknowledged the learning material offered by the university. Similarly, students identify themselves as being capable of autonomous learning (inherently and taught). These are skills which have significantly developed throughout their degree due to the tools and guidance offered by the University; leading to their progression into independent learners. Furthermore, students indicated that it was the feedback proffered by tutors (alongside LD material) which played an important role in this development. However, some participants did argue that motivation dictated their level of dedication towards their studies, influencing their pace of development into becoming self-directed learners. Motivation was influential alongside time constraints; in terms of finding the time to attend LD workshops if the student had a busy or conflicting timetable (Table 7).

Timing	<p><i>“If I had the time, I can get there and do it”</i></p> <p><i>“I’d love to go but the majority of the ones this year and last year that I wanted to go to all fell within lectures and deadlines”</i></p> <p><i>“Because I haven’t got as much time as all my other colleagues, I can’t actually do” [as many workshops]</i></p> <p><i>“It sometimes coincides with the lectures... When I’m busy there are tutorials but I do not make that”</i></p>
Lack of motivation	<p><i>“When I don’t have a lecture and I would definitely make the time to go and get there”</i></p> <p><i>“Don’t have time... and sometimes I’m not interested”</i></p> <p><i>“I’m aware of them... But I haven’t, (Laughter) used them to be honest”</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t know very much about them, so... I’ve seen like things from the email and stuff”</i></p>

Table 7: Influential factors upon a student’s development as a self-directed learner

These findings are consistent with past research which proved students need suitable guidance to develop independent learning (Skillen and Mahony, 1997; Lublin and Prosser, 1994; Keenan, 2011) demonstrating the importance of feedback within LD and illustrating its potential to obstruct the development of student pedagogy if it is ineffective (Black and William, 1998; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Knapper and Cropley, 2000; Bound, 2000; Miller and Parlett, 1974).

However, the perceived value of feedback cannot be extrapolated to all students from this single study, as it is not possible to capture the varying learning processes within a small sample size. In addition, motivation needs to be considered, as it is a major factor if not the only cause to encouraging student pedagogy (Tyler, 1949; Liu and Carless 2006). However, it is beyond the scope of this study to fully investigate the extent motivation influences academic achievement. The same is said for time constraints. Nonetheless, the results from

this study support the notion that personal attributes may affect a student’s ability to develop autonomous learning skills (Higgins, 2000; Wickens, Forbes and Tribe, 2006; Tett, Hounsell, Chrisite, Cree and McCune, 2012). Therefore despite this study offering further insight into the role of feedback within LD in HE, how it is employed by students may be dictated by their personal characteristics. For example, those students without the personality attributes which contribute to self-directed learning may not effectively utilise the tools available to them, and thus fail to achieve their full academic ability or develop the skills needed for autonomous learning. Therefore it is suggested that students need to be taught how to take ownership over what they learn, and gives rationale for integrating LD into the timetable for tourism students.

### 5.0 Conclusion and recommendations

From these findings it is asserted that student concern about the feedback process is personal and relates to the individual’s own learning process. The individual learning process and personality traits then bear influence on the areas of student concern, and are reflective of the main issues identified from within the literature. Therefore, the impact of feedback on student LD remains somewhat limited, as each individual is affected in different ways. Some students digest the feedback effectively (from an academic perspective), and learn from the process, whereas others do not value the feedback that has been provided for them. Further to these individual impacts, some understanding about the collective student practice can be drawn from the study. This is important to infer, as with such knowledge, learning materials can be enriched, and feedback can be communicated in a more effective way for students to digest.

A key message is communication. Consistent communication is vital between teachers and students to enhance feedback, as it was found that student dissatisfaction with feedback was a side-effect of initial misinterpretation of the assessment criteria, rather than the content of comments provided. As a result, school level guidelines (for best practice) have been presented (Table 8) in a bid to improve both LD and teaching practice and to improve the consistency of the messages communicated to students. These guidelines act as a series of practical implementations, a series of suggestions that teachers could take on board to enhance the feedback process from a student perspective. However, caution is required.

Guideline	Explanation
Sustain consistent dialogue with students.	Consistent communication can enable students to digest feedback more effectively. Therefore, teachers can aim to sustain regular dialogue with students throughout their degree by opening up modes of communication. Verbal and written contact can build ‘relationships’ between students and lecturers, and motivate students to learn. Overtime, as LD skills are acquired and built upon, autonomous and independent learners are created. Isolated students tend to struggle, as they fail to cultivate their own academic literacy skills and deter independent learning. Therefore, consistent communication is vital to enhance a student’s ability to digest feedback.
Create and convey uniformity in assessment criteria.	Student dissatisfaction with feedback can be seen as a side-effect of initial misinterpretation of the assessment criteria. This is mainly due to the variety of assessment types, the curriculum being perceived as

	<p>‘hidden’, and the lack of uniformity across the degree course. Therefore, lecturers can aim to convey uniformity through verbal and written communications, to nurture student success. From the way assessments are articulated, presented in module handbooks, and criteria are presented on the feedback form, uniformity can enhance student literacy skills. Enrichment of these skills is possible, as LD is a process that enables a student to acquire new, and unlock inherent skills. Uniformity means, the curriculum becomes more obvious overtime. Students gain a better view of expectations, and can digest the criteria more effectively as all elements of assessment become visible. Thus, avoiding misinterpretation in the first place; making feedback more effective as students can take ownership over their own learning, and gain skills to become independent learners.</p>
Incorporate three stages of feedback within each module.	<p>The value of feedback can be emphasised and then digested more effectively by students if they are engaged in a feedback process. By offering a range of feedback opportunities, students can develop as autonomous learners, and feedback can encourage introspective thought. To avoid misinterpretation, and offer an avenue for clarification, preparatory guidance, in-task guidance, and performance feedback become important, regardless of the type of assessment. Feedback should be provided on three distinct, separate occasions in order to enhance a student’s chance of developing their learning at university. These stages can be incorporated as exercises, through lecturers delivering an assignment briefing, assignment workshop, and feedback session respectively that contain both formative and summative advice. Then, by consistently including these sessions in each module, it should be possible to close the gap in skills that enables students to translate feedback, by enhancing student LD. As students become more educated on the processes and purposes of feedback, students are able to digest feedback more effectively, and acknowledge the role of feedforward in HE; to improve their performance.</p>
Create opportunities for feedback to improve future assignments.	<p>It is important to provide students with explicit instructions on how to improve their performance. This can be achieved by lecturers who offer students opportunities to submit drafts, hold discussions, seek clarification, and reflect on assignments. Such opportunities not only develop relationships, but they improve the student perception of the feedback process. Working in conjunction with other implications (consistent dialogue and uniformity), opportunities can be created throughout the feedback cycle. Importantly, the feedback needs to be timely, consistent and critical. Timely, by effectively communicating when the feedback will be returned, as students perceive the cycle as being continuous, they do not comprehend working day/week turnarounds as excluding weekends and holidays. Consistent, by using uniform feedback sheets to enhance student literacy skills overtime. Plus critical, by acknowledging a student’s existing strengths and pinpointing the weaker areas of their assignment to improve future submissions.</p>

Table 8: School level guidelines for best practice



Firstly caution is required as LD is viewed as a process, and recommendations for literacy skills needs to be embedded and developed differently for each year group. This should range from LD being taught in the 1<sup>st</sup> year, to being inherent in students as they move into their final year at University. Caution is also required, as the recommendations are formed from a student perspective; not an academics. Therefore the recommendations do not provide an overall balanced approach towards giving and digesting feedback. Thirdly, each module content, assessment type, teaching style, and student learning style differs, shifts and changes over time. Therefore, the LD process needs to remain dynamic and interactive, and responsive to student needs. Finally, caution is required as the suggestions have not yet been tested. Future research still needs to be undertaken to discover a balanced approach to providing and digesting feedback. To find such balance, future research should take account of academic and student perceptions, and the tools at each institutes disposal. This may then offer all parties guidance. More specifically, it will be responsive to the requirements of students, as individuals, whilst improving academic practice, as *how* students experience and learn at University can be better understood, and better prepared for.

To demonstrate how such recommendations can be implemented in the classroom to aid student LD, an example is given in Figure 1. This example illustrates the purpose of offering three stages of feedback within each module, and details some potential exercises that can be conducted in the class room to encourage student LD. What is key here is that students are offered guidance. Guidance should include how and when the goals of an assessment are articulated, and any relevant submission advice. Use ‘student friendly’ language, and train your students as cue seekers. Finally, give them the skills to check their own drafts, as it is essential that students understand the assignment brief and the assessment marking criteria before undertaking their assessment. The purpose is to provide consistent communication, avoid misinterpretation, and provide students with explicit and tacit explanations, throughout the assessment process. Exemplars and workshops can assist with communicating course expectations as well.

	<b>Preparatory guidance</b>	<b>In-task guidance</b>	<b>Performance feedback</b>
<b>Session</b>	Assignment briefing	Assessment workshop	Feedback session
<b>Purpose</b>	To articulate the goals of an assessment	To clarify the goals of an assessment	To confirm and explain assessment outcomes
<b>Content</b>	Explain the assessment criteria	Reiterate the assessment criteria	Discuss how the criteria has been achieved / unachieved
	Provide model answers and exemplars	Enable discussions, seek clarifications, and offer negotiations	Link the assessment to future assessments (structure and referencing, if not content)
	Conduct an exercise whereby students participate in marking a past assignment	Conduct an exercise to incorporate an assignment draft and peer assessment	Conduct an exercise whereby students have to reflect on their feedback
<b>Learning development</b>	Make students aware of LD material	Use LD material in class	Reflect on LD material

Figure 1: Example of how to deliver consistent and uniform feedback to students to develop LD skills

Overtime then, as LD skills develop it is anticipated that students may desire more personalised feedback. Therefore, the process should become less prescriptive for each stage group, to map their progress as self-directed learners, and should aim to incorporate 1-2-1 feedback opportunities. The challenge, is to help students absorb the assessment criteria, and to unlock their inherent ability whilst cultivating additional LD skills. At the same time, opportunities for students to seek advice and develop their own expertise should be given, in a consistent and transparent manner across degree programmes.

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