

The Feedback Café – creating opportunities for dialogue between students and staff regarding assessment and feedback

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Abstract

Feedback practices in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are often ineffective due to a combination of high staff workloads, low levels of student engagement and inadequate assessment literacy. To improve assessment literacy and student engagement with feedback at a UK HEI we introduced a Feedback Café initiative. Our Feedback Café was co-developed with students and has run for three years as a drop-in stall, manned by educators and student partners. The Feedback Café provides regular opportunities for students to ask questions about assessments and supports them to interpret and use feedback effectively. To explore student perceptions of the Feedback Café we surveyed two cohorts of Year 1 – 4 undergraduates (2021-22 N = 767; 2022-23 N = 729) gathering quantitative and qualitative data. Thematic analysis conducted on open-text responses revealed ways in which the Feedback Café was useful, barriers to attendance, and suggestions on how to improve through ongoing staff-student partnerships. The Feedback Café is generalizable to any subject and provides students with opportunities for two-way dialogue with relatively low staff workload. By sharing our insights, we aim to contribute to the efforts to improve assessment and feedback practices in HEIs and provide a guide for those interested in implementing a Feedback Café initiative.

Introduction

Assessment has a powerful influence on student learning (Biggs, 2003) and has been viewed as a more influential driver than teaching in determining what students pay attention to, how much effort they put in and the quality of their engagement (Boud, 2007). Quality feedback is the most powerful influence on student achievement (Brown & Knight, 1994; Fraser, 1987). Despite this, assessment and feedback often receive low satisfaction ratings from students, as seen in surveys like the UK National Student Survey (NSS) (Office for Students, 2024). This dissatisfaction stems from factors such as limited student-staff dialogue (Williams & Kane, 2009), reliance on written feedback, a lack of personalized feedback and limited opportunities for assessment literacy development (Carless & Boud 2018; Winstone *et al.*, 2017; Price, 2012).

Feedback is a critical component of the learning process, as it provides students with valuable information about their performance and guides their future learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Henderson *et al.*, 2019). It is important that feedback helps to close the gap between students' actual performance and what constitutes a better performance (Sadler, 1989). However, students often find feedback unclear, vague, or unactionable (Carless & Boud, 2018; Dawson *et al.*, 2019) which may indicate issues with feedback quality or

assessment literacy of educators and students (Price *et al.*, 2010). Assessment literacy refers to the understanding of the principles and practices of assessment, including the ability to interpret feedback, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies for future learning. Improving assessment literacy is crucial for enhancing feedback practices (Carless & Boud, 2018; Price, 2012; Winstone *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, it is well established that a major obstacle to effective feedback practices is low student feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018), with feedback literacy pertaining to the set of attitudes and abilities that are needed for the learner to make sense of their feedback and utilise it to improve performance (Sutton 2012; Woitt *et al.*, 2023). With better literacy, students become more active participants in the feedback process, using feedback effectively to improve their learning (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone *et al.* 2017). Enhancing assessment and feedback literacy can be achieved, in part, by creating opportunities for dialogue that allow students to explore their own gaps in understanding of feedback practices, thereby aligning with social constructivist learning theories and acknowledging the notion of tacit knowledge (Palincsar, 1988; Carless & Boud, 2018). Movement away from the traditional model of feedback as ‘transmission’, a unidirectional process that fails to engage students in active meaning-making (Carless & Boud 2018), is therefore essential.

The development of feedback literacy and effective self-assessment rely on student feedback seeking behaviour, because this empowers students to calibrate and refine their own judgements (Yan and Carless, 2021). Historically, feedback seeking behaviour has been under-explored in the literature, with a strong focus on feedback ‘provision’. Recent research, however, has started to explore reasons why many students actively avoid seeking feedback from their lecturers, with results suggesting an urgent need to encourage undergraduate students to seek feedback in settings that feel psychologically safe (Young & Carless 2024). Student engagement is key to successful assessment and feedback practices (Dawson *et al.*, 2019; Delva *et al.*, 2013). Poor satisfaction occurs when feedback is seen as the final step, rather than a tool for improvement (Winstone *et al.*, 2017). When students actively engage with feedback, they are more likely to value and utilize it (Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Initiatives that promote student engagement, such as dialogue and verbal feedback, can enhance student understanding and use of feedback, improving learning outcomes (Winstone *et al.*, 2017; Nicol 2010). Future research needs to include partnership approaches with shared responsibilities between staff and students and should explore ways to develop student and teacher feedback literacy in tandem (Carless and Winstone, 2023).

Over-reliance on written feedback can limit engagement and understanding (Nicol, 2010). Effective feedback should involve an equitable dialogue between students and educators, allowing students to ask questions and engage in a meaningful discussion about their learning to develop a deeper understanding of the assessment expectations (Evans 2013). Amongst all feedback communication methods, verbal feedback allows the offering of personalised insights and emotional support. The emotional dimensions of feedback are important to consider since cognitive processing can be impaired by certain emotional states (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Understanding how students regulate emotions in negative feedback situations is key for learning how we can empower them to engage with and act on feedback effectively (Grundmann *et al.*, 2024). Given that students have different

preferences for methods of learning, providing a variety of feedback formats caters to diverse student needs, increasing inclusivity (Evans & Waring, 2011).

While addressing assessment and feedback challenges is crucial, staff workload in higher education must also be considered. Over 90% of further education staff reported increased pace and intensity of work in the past three years, with 41% citing unmanageable workloads (UCU workload survey 2022). Such workload challenges risk undermining the quality of education. Effective feedback practices, such as personalised verbal feedback, can be time-consuming, especially in large classes. Balancing quality feedback with workload constraints requires thoughtful and innovative solutions.

Assessment practice in our discipline of Biological Sciences, typically involves the use of written assessment briefs (including marking criteria) being released with notifications via a virtual learning environment. Students do a variety of assessments including practical/scientific reports, essays, posters/infographics, podcasts, presentations and open-book exams. Assessment feedback is usually provided as written comments explaining what they did well and what they could improve together with a mark justification, with explicit reference to the marking criteria. When this feedback process is reviewed during the end-of-unit surveys within our department, students often request more demand for opportunities to discuss assessment & feedback with staff. However, when feedback opportunities are offered as weekly office hours, our experience shows low attendance during these sessions, suggesting while students seek dialogue, office hours are not the best method. Feedback practices become unproductive when student engagement is low and staff workload is high. Feedback should shift to a learning-focussed process where students actively engage with and apply feedback to future learning activities (e.g. Boud & Molloy, 2013; Price *et al.*, 2011).

To address the needs of students while balancing staff workload, we introduced a novel initiative that we called the Feedback Café. The Feedback Café provides a regular opportunity for dialogue with instructors where students can ask questions about assessment and feedback, gain advice on interpreting feedback and understand how to improve their academic performance. By fostering dialogue and verbal feedback, the Feedback Café addresses the limitations of traditional written feedback and promotes student engagement and assessment literacy.

The Feedback Café was an initiative developed by the Assessment and Feedback team in the School of Biological sciences, with the aim of enhancing the overall feedback-feedforward loop across undergraduate assessments in collaboration with student partners. At the onset of this project, the student partners comprised of two undergraduate students, one postgraduate student and one graduated student. Staff worked together with these student partners to design and implement the Feedback Café.

The Feedback Café is run as a drop-in stall in the atrium of the departmental building during term time. At the time of the study the Café was held for one hour every two weeks, and we have since increased this to weekly due to increased popularity. The scheduling of the Café was chosen to minimize conflicts with teaching-related activities to maximise accessibility for students (Moore *et al.*, 2019), but also to coincide with the time when free tea, coffee and

biscuits are provided for students within the department as part of an existing social initiative. In terms of implementation, the Feedback Café was introduced at different points for different cohorts. For the 2021-22 cohort, the Café began in the sixth week of the term, while for the 2022-23 cohort, the Café was available from the start of term and ran later in the day compared to the previous year. The Feedback Café is facilitated by a team comprising of academic staff from the department and a student advisor (also one of the student partners from the project) from the University 'Study Skills' service, who was paid for their time. The 'Study Skills' service provides tutorials, workshops and resources for effective study. To promote awareness and encourage participation we used a variety of methods to advertise the Feedback Café which included: displaying posters around the departmental building; disseminating information via department-wide emails; integrating promotion into the tutorial programme; and encouraging teaching staff to share details about the initiative during teaching activities.

The aims of the study are threefold: (1) to share the lessons we learned as staff and student partners running a Feedback Café, (2) share the process for implementing a Feedback Café at a departmental level, and (3) to share the perceptions of students regarding the Feedback Café. By sharing these insights, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to improve assessment and feedback practices in higher education, whilst also considering the workload implications for staff.

Methods

The Feedback Café was advertised and made available to all members of the undergraduate student cohort across Years 1-4 (2021-22 N = 767; 2022-23 N = 729). Therefore, the participant pool for the study were the undergraduate cohort of students across all four levels of study within the academic years 2021-22 (from now on referred to as 2022) and 2022-23 (from now on referred to as 2023). The study took place within the School of Biological Sciences at a research-intensive university in the UK.

Student perceptions of the Feedback Café were collected using a survey which gathered both quantitative metrics and qualitative responses to open-ended questions. The survey was distributed online using Microsoft Forms (<https://forms.office.com>), making it easily accessible to participants and researchers and negating the need for an interviewer which can introduce problems such as social desirability bias (Larson, 2019). Recruitment adverts for the survey were sent via email mailing lists to reach the participant pools of students, and time was set aside in teaching sessions to allow students to participate in the survey. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous; thus participants were recruited on a self-selection basis. Students completed the two surveys between April - June 2022 and March - June 2023. These dates fell during the second teaching period of the academic year and before the end of year examinations. The survey sent in 2022 was split into four sections: (1) Awareness of the Feedback Café (2) effectiveness of modes of promotion of the Feedback Café (3) attendance and reasons for not attending a Feedback Café, and (4) the usefulness of the Feedback Café. The survey was updated in 2023 to include a quantitative version of the question 'is there a particular reason for not attending a Feedback Café session' with optional

answers to choose from, and an additional section: (5) suggestions for improvements. Both surveys provided students the opportunity to write free-text responses.

To better understand the student experience of the Feedback Café, we adopted a concurrent triangulation design which enabled a greater depth of understanding of our research questions through the collection of different, yet complementary data (Creswell *et al.*, 2003). This model allowed both quantitative and qualitative data types to be collected during the same research period. We conducted a thematic analysis of open-text responses to the survey. Each data type was analysed independently and then discussed and compared together by all members of the research team to gain an in-depth and integrated interpretation of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark., 2011) and to explore emerging themes within the data. Qualitative data were assigned codes which represented key ideas, and these codes were used to derive themes. Student responses were coded separately by three of the authors according to an inductive and latent approach which takes the implicit meaning behind the student explanations, as per the method outlined by Braun *et al.* (2024). For example, a response by a student which described how they felt the Feedback Café helped them understand what is best to include when writing an essay, was assigned to the code 'internalisation of standards'. A comparison of codes between authors led to the identification of the most relevant themes, and irrelevant codes were discounted from the final results. Coding was carried out according to each of the three author's preferences either using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo Pro 12, QSR International) or simple pen and paper. Additional measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness in the analysis process, including storing our data in a well-organized archive, reflective journaling by all three authors, regular researcher triangulation and peer debriefing, a clear audit trail, as well as collective vetting and mapping of themes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Quantitative data was analysed in Microsoft Excel and RStudio (RStudio Team, 2023).

Findings

Of the students who were sent the survey, 13% (N = 92/729) from 2023 and 12% (N = 89/767) from 2022 took part. The breakdown of participants from each year in 2023 was: Year 1 (N= 31/197), Year 2 (N = 51/252), Year 3 (N = 8/242), and Year 4 (N= 2/38). The breakdown of participants from each year in 2022 was: Year 1 (N = 42/260), Year 2 (N = 40/248), Year 3 (N = 7/216) and Year 4 (N = 0/43). Whilst the response rate may seem a lower than average for online surveys (Wu *et al.*, 2022) the number of responses is typical for surveys of this type in the department (in 2021-2022 some response rates were as low as 7 or 8%, although this varied widely with some units typically returning 15-25% response rates; no data available for 2022-2023). Data from both student cohorts were combined in the following analyses, unless stated otherwise.

Of the students surveyed in 2022, 78% (N = 63/89) were 'very aware' or 'somewhat aware' of the Feedback Café, increasing to 92% (N = 84/92) in 2023, suggesting successful advertising to a certain degree, although taking into consideration the self-selection bias of participants who took part in the survey, this may not represent a true proportion of the student body, but instead those who were already at least somewhat aware of the Café. Both cohorts rated advertising methods similarly, with posters deemed least effective (53% rated them 'very' or

‘somewhat ineffective’, N = 74/139). The most effective method was information provided by teaching staff during sessions, with 88% of students (N = 120/135) finding it ‘very’ or ‘somewhat effective’ (Figure 1).

From the 2022 and 2023 cohorts, 72% (N = 59/81) and 67% (N = 52/77) respectively either ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that the Feedback Café was held frequently enough to be useful, whether they had attended one or not. A large proportion (39%, N = 15/38) of the 2023 cohort preferred the Feedback Café taking place once every two weeks. However, these students all indicated that they would like to have additional support with assessment and feedback when they have just received feedback (32%, N = 12/38) as well as when a new assessment is released (24%, N = 9/38). A minority (5%, N = 2/38) of students wanted additional support outside of term time during ‘reading week’ (see Figure 2a).

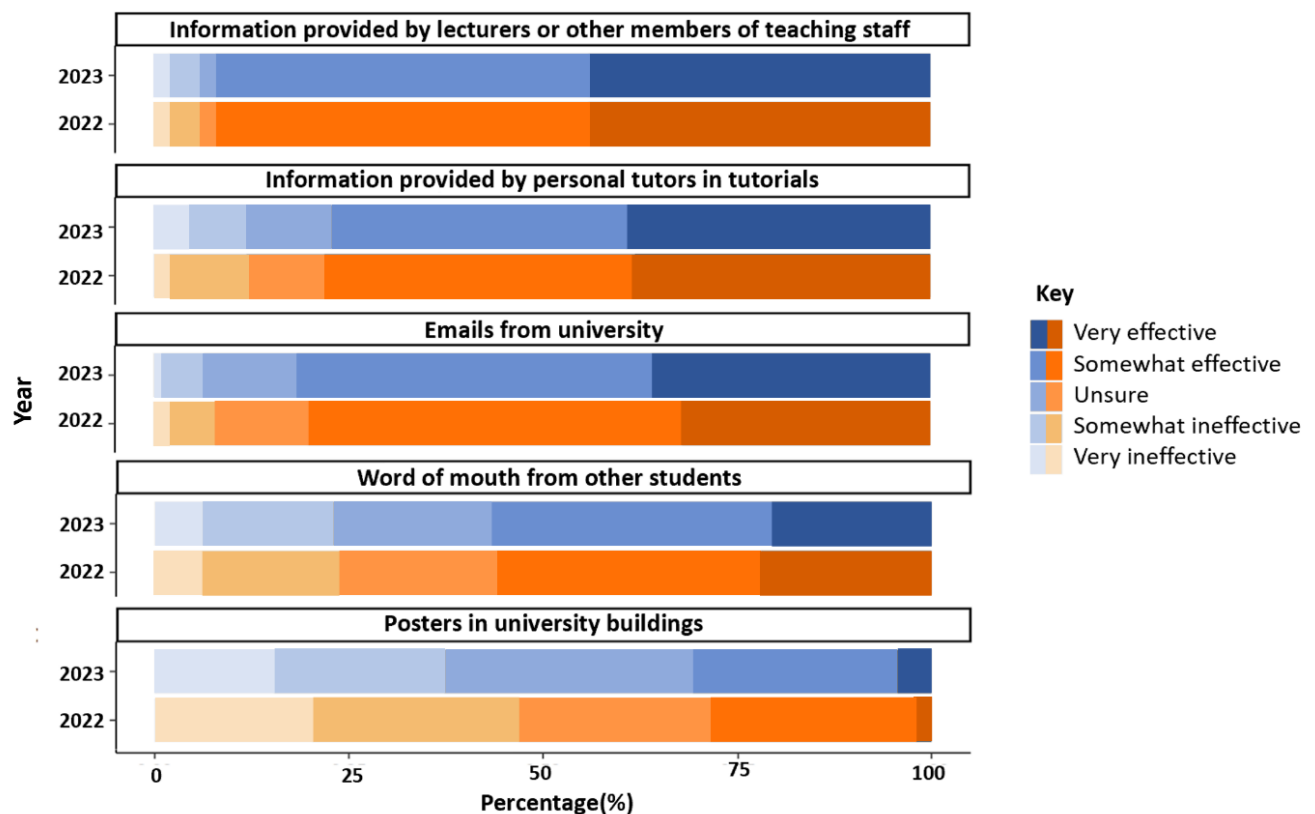


Figure 1. The percentage of students that reported the effectiveness of different advertisement methods for the Feedback Café on a five-point Likert scale from ‘very effective’ to ‘very ineffective’. Two cohorts were surveyed, 2021-22 and 2022-23.

(a) Feedback Café timing: when would you prefer to have support with your assessments and feedback in the future?



(b) Is there a particular reason for not attending a Feedback Café session?



(c) Feedback Café timing: When would you prefer to have support with your assessments and feedback in the future?
Feedback Café function: what sort of support do you want to see in future sessions?

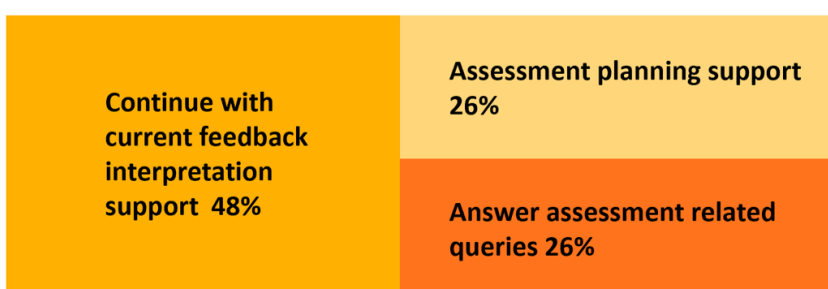


Figure 2. Quantitative participant responses from the 2022-23 cohort to the questions (a) “Is there a particular reason for not attending a Feedback Café session?” (b) “When would you prefer to have support with your assessments and feedback in the future?” and (c) a question related to what kind of support related to assessment and feedback would they like to see in future Feedback Cafés. Surface area represents the relative proportion of responses.

In 2022 and 2023, 32% (N = 26/88) and 30% (N = 28/92) of students, respectively, reported attending the Feedback Café at least once. Among non-attendees, 71% (2022, N = 44/62) and 89% (2023, N = 56/63) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they were aware of the Café as a resource. Within the 2023 cohort, the main reasons for not attending were not feeling the need (55%, N = 16/29), timetable clashes (31%, N = 9/29), and discomfort approaching staff (20%, N = 6/29) (Figure 2b).

Students found the Feedback Café useful in a number of ways, with 69% (N = 29/42) reporting they 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' it improved their understanding of assessments and feedback, and 81% (N = 28/38) applying what they learned from the Café to enhance their work (Figure 3). Nearly half (48%, N = 19/39) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' the Café addressed their feedback concerns. For future support, students wanted a continuation of current feedback interpretation support (48%, N = 16/34), assessment planning support (26%, N = 9/42), and for staff to address assessment related queries (26%, N = 9/42) (Figure 2c).

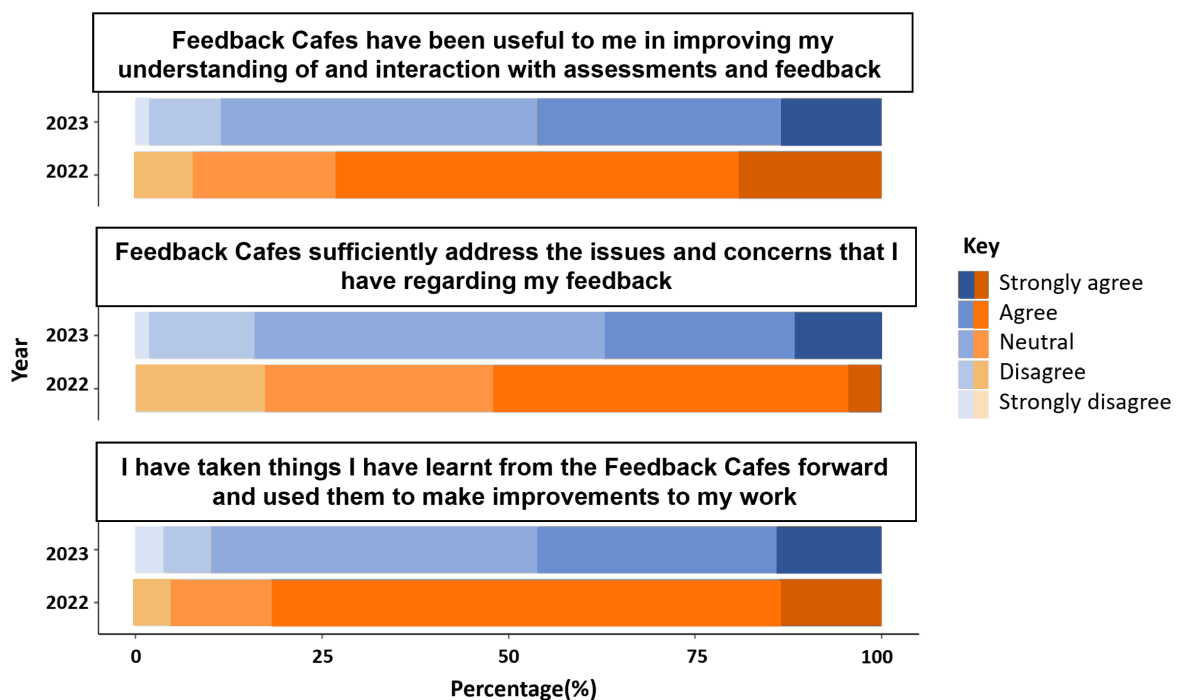


Figure 3. The percentage of students that reported their level of agreement on three questions related to the usefulness of the Feedback Café on a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Two cohorts were surveyed, 2021-22 and 2022-23.

Thematic Analysis

Through thematic analysis, we coded student responses and used these to define themes. We identified three main themes from the free text responses within the surveys. These were: barriers to attendance; ways in which the Feedback Café was perceived to be helpful; and ways in which the Feedback Café was perceived to be unhelpful (Table 1).

Theme	Sub code	Description	Example quotes
Barriers to attendance	Haven't felt the need to use the FC.	The FC would not be useful or written feedback was sufficient to use or justified the mark clearly.	"So far I have felt that my results and feedback have been fair." "Use the feedback already given to me"
	The scheduled time and place of the FC.	Unable to attend the FC due to conflicting schedule (sports, other departmental run social activities, personal schedule, teaching activities).	"Always on a Wednesday when I have sports commitments." "Overlaps with timetabled lab session."
	Not considered timely in terms of marks and feedback release.	The FC occurs either too soon or too late after marks and feedback release.	"Feedback from assignments only just came out."
	Lack of awareness.	Unawareness of the FC or forgetting when the FC is scheduled.	"I haven't used it, and don't know what it is." "Haven't remembered on the day."
	Comfort levels of attending.	Feeling too uncomfortable, intimidated, worried, or shy to attend. Feeling uncertain as to the structure and format of the FC.	"It also seems a bit intimidating to sit down with someone especially when you've had a bad grade." "Not really knowing how they work and what sort of feedback is given".
Ways in which the Café was perceived to be helpful	Provided signposting to resources.	The FC signposted students to resources that they could use for independent learning to improve.	"It was very good and useful and provided me with resources for future improvements of critical thinking"
	Assisted students in understanding, interpreting, and applying feedback.	The FC provided support so students could understand, interpret, and apply feedback to future pieces of work.	"Went through feedback on a first year essay and used the help in a later essay and got a better grade."
	Students seeking assessment support.	The FC provided pre-assessment support for students.	"I've also been able to ask for advice on future assessments." "helped with referencing issues"
	Internalization of standards.	The FC provided guidance on what constitutes academic quality, for example how to improve work in the future.	"Helped me ascertain what is best in an essay." "Overall it was helpful just to understand marking criteria better."
Ways in which the Feedback Café was perceived to be unhelpful	Feedback conversation was perceived as vague or general.	The discussion regarding feedback during the FC was too vague or generic to understood or apply to improve work.	"I found the feedback was quite generic, yet not very transferable to future work."
	Student needs not met.	The FC did not address the concerns regarding an assessment sufficiently, student requests for further feedback from tutors or a mechanism to support mark and feedback queries.	"I felt concerns I had about my assignments were not addressed."

Table 1: Codes and themes from student surveys regarding the Feedback Café (FC).

Theme 1. Barriers to Attendance.

We identified five categories which explained the barriers to student's attendance to the Feedback Café. Firstly, some students hadn't felt the need to use the Feedback Café because they didn't think it would be useful because they didn't appreciate the purpose of the Café or what they could gain from attending. Some felt the written feedback they had already received was sufficient and fair, for example:

"I think that the mark correlates with the mark scheme so I haven't had the need to query it".

We interpret this comment as evidence of assessment literacy in some of our students. Responses indicated students hadn't felt the need to attend given that they could already understand and use the feedback received. Other responses highlighted their conflicting personal or academic schedule with the Café e.g. sports commitments or other departmental run social activities or the in-person nature of the Café, for example:

"financial/covid issues preventing me from physically attending uni a lot of the time" (representative quote).

Also related to scheduling is that the Feedback Café was not considered timely by some in terms of marks and feedback release. Responses indicated the Café was too soon after feedback from an assignment came out, or were too late, for example one student responded that the Café was:

"too long after I need the help, and then I have forgotten my problem by then and it no longer seems important".

This result indicates a preference for the timing of the Feedback Café to coincide with specific events, such as when feedback is released. It is well documented that timeliness of feedback, with regards to feedback being returned promptly within a specific timeframe, is important to maximise educational benefit (Carless *et al.*, 2011; Li & De Luca, 2014; Norcini *et al.*, 2011). However, our results suggest that the timeliness of the engagement with feedback is just as important. Lack of awareness of the Feedback Café was another barrier to attendance, with responses demonstrating students weren't aware of its existence or had forgotten. Some respondents shared that they felt too shy to attend the Feedback Café or did not feel comfortable citing that it would be

"intimidating to sit down with someone especially when you've had a bad grade".

Others were too uncertain of the structure and format of the Café to attend with responses such as they:

"would be worried that there'd be too many people for everyone to have time to discuss their work" (representative quote).

This theme highlights some simple strategies that could be put in place to improve attendance. Varying the schedule would support more students to attend given their other commitments. From a respondent's suggestion, one way to support students' time-management and thus attendance would be to add Feedback Café sessions to their university timetables as opposed to relying on students to make a note of the schedule on their personal calendars.

Discomfort in approaching staff was reported by 16% of the 2023 cohort (Figure 2b), showing that this is not a concern limited to a small minority of students. Whilst a student partner was always in attendance at the Feedback Café to support students, this was not mentioned by any of the respondents, indicating they were either unaware of this provision, or perhaps it was taken-for-granted and not considered worth mentioning. Although the last cohort surveyed (2023) indicated that most students (92%) are already aware of the Feedback Café, information regarding the structure and format should be better communicated. Advertisements should also include more details of how attending the Feedback Café will be useful to students and highlight the availability of a student partner to talk to rather than a member of academic staff.

Theme 2: Ways in which the Feedback Café was perceived to be helpful

Four categories were generated for ways in which the Café was helpful to students. Firstly, the Café provided signposting to resources for students to use to improve their work independently. Although not a primary aim, students identified the Café as helpful by providing signposting to resources which they could use to improve their work independently, a core skill and essential 'graduate attribute'. The inclusion of a student partner signposting to university services no doubt contributed to this outcome, although this was not mentioned explicitly by respondents. Seeking advice also encourages students to reflect on their strengths, limitations and needs. As students use the Café for pre-assessment advice, the Café could be an additional tool to signpost students to campus wellbeing support as well as academic support resources. Secondly, the Café provided assessment support such as help with individual assignments, referencing issues, or as an opportunity to gain advice. Consulting with an educator for clarity on the expectations of an assessment helps students better prepare, reducing anxiety and stress (Howard, 2020) which improves academic performance (Richardson *et al.*, 2012). The Café also enabled better understanding of standards which included an improved understanding of the marking criteria as well as being:

"... helpful in understanding precisely how to improve my work" (representative quote).

It is important for students to internalize standards when interpreting feedback to compare their actual level to their desired level. According to Sadler's (1989) conditions for effective feedback, it is important that feedback helps close the gap between student's actual performance and what constitutes a better performance. Sadler argues that for students to compare their work against standards and take action, they must possess a concept of the standard being aimed for as well as evaluative skills. Internalization of standards allows students to build these important self-assessment skills as well as to support students to self-regulate their learning and take steps to improve their work and bridge such a gap (Juwah *et al.*, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). The Feedback Café assisted students in

understanding, interpreting and applying feedback as demonstrated by the response that the Café:

“Helped with interpreting ambiguous feedback, and with understanding how to apply seemingly topic-specific feedback to broader topics” (representative quote).

Responses within this theme show that the Feedback Café has met its aims to provide opportunity for students to seek clarification, interpret and apply their feedback, and develop a deeper understanding of assessment practices.

Theme 3: Ways in which the Feedback Café was perceived to be unhelpful.

We identified two ways in which the Feedback Café was perceived to be unhelpful. Firstly, feedback conversations were perceived as “vague” or “general” and “not very transferable to future work”. Responses from students explaining why they did not feel the need to attend the Feedback Café suggested an understanding of written feedback and how the mark and feedback correlate to marking guidelines, suggesting a good level of assessment literacy and interpretation of feedback (see Theme 1). However, students also identified the discussions during the Café as unhelpful when discussions were ‘vague’ or ‘general’, which suggests the opposite. We interpret these comments from students as a lack of understanding of the terminology used within discussions, and a lack of assessment literacy, and so the feedback doesn’t become meaningful (Winstone *et al.*, 2017). Although the aim of the dialogic aspect of the Feedback Café is to overcome such barriers to interpreting feedback, these responses suggest that sustained discussions with students regarding assessment literacy is needed, and the Feedback Café is not a quick fix. Secondly, some respondents felt their needs were not met. Examples provided included that concerns related to assessments were not addressed or that requests for further feedback had not been met. One response, while rare, demonstrated a requirement for a mechanism if staff at the Feedback Café spot an error:

“I went for help with feedback on [Assessment X]. It was explained well but they agreed that some of my feedback did not actually match up to my work”.

It seems the Feedback Café can provide an opportunity for students to informally query marks and for staff-student dialogue surrounding concerns related to the accuracy of their feedback.

Authors reflections from running The Feedback Café

Reflecting on one’s own practice is vital for personal growth and improving professional methods (Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983, Leonardo, 2004). Here we share insights from a staff member and a student partner involved in running the Feedback Café, highlighting its application and importance.

Staff reflection.

At the time of writing, we have been running the Feedback Café for several years and its presence within the department has been cemented. As a result, attendance by students has

increased dramatically leading to continual staff/student dialogue for the full hour, with 2 – 3 staff and a student partner (who is paid for their time) manning the table. It has been hugely gratifying to see the success of the initiative purely from a student engagement standpoint. We found attendance improved when a member of staff attended from a unit with an upcoming assessment or with feedback that had just been released. Staff who manned the Café during such occasions found workload benefits in how they respond to student queries regarding feedback as well as enjoyment in the opportunity for dialogue with students about their learning:

“As the academic lead for an assessment for which the feedback and marks had just been released, it was really helpful to be able to attend the Feedback Café rather than responding to email queries which are less helpful to students (and less enjoyable for staff) than engaging in a 2-way dialogue”. [Teaching staff on a Year 1 mandatory unit]

Students from all years of study attended the Feedback Cafés and we found that some students attended on their own, others with a group of friends, with some requesting to speak to either a member of staff or the student partner specifically. This perhaps suggests that the Café supports a variety of student needs and comfort levels. We found some students prepared for the Feedback Café by bringing in examples of work or feedback to discuss, whilst others stopped by spontaneously after seeing the Café to ask a quick question about upcoming assessments, demonstrating the value of a physical presence in a communal area.

Many times, we found students asking questions that meet the intended purpose of the Feedback Café initiative; questioning their approach to a particular piece of assessment; how they can improve on a particular skillset according to previous feedback; as well as gaining clarity on written feedback. Importantly, we found some students attended for a general discussion about their performance according to their reflections on feedback over a longer period of time, showing they were examining their performance holistically over many assessments in order to feed-forward.

We noticed that most students attending the Café were achieving grades within the 2:1 boundary (60 - 69%) and wanted guidance to achieve a first-class mark (> 70%). The dialogic nature of the Café provided some ‘lightbulb’ moments for these students to realise what they needed to do to improve their performance on other assignments. For example, through discussing terminology within the marking criteria such as ‘critical evaluation’ or ‘synthesis’ students could fully understand what this criterion encompasses and how to demonstrate this skill, thus improving their assessment literacy and internalisation of standards.

Student partner reflection.

Participating in the Feedback Café as a student partner has been an invaluable experience, as it has allowed me to gain an insight into the department’s assessment processes. Combining this experience with my role as a course representative, I have been able to incorporate my understanding of departmental processes with student perspectives to help the Feedback Café team close the gap between current processes and student expectations. For example, through discussions during the Café, I helped some students resolve the perception that the

mark scheme was “vague” by providing examples of how their work matched up to terms in the marking criteria.

I am also a ‘Study Skills’ advocate for the University Student Services team. At first, I supported the Café by signposting students to University Student Services resources. As I gained more experience running the Café alongside academic staff, I was able to help students with their assessment queries and give them tips based on my personal experience. I found the experience especially fulfilling as I could reflect on my learning experience to help my peers avoid common pitfalls as well as assist them in bridging gaps in their understanding before reaching the ‘ah-ha’ moment.

As a final year student who has experienced many of the assessments within the department, I am able to relate to the emotional and academic experience of other students attending the Café. For example, I can relate to how “I remember that pie chart took me painfully long to make” and appreciate students’ frustration when they share that “I’ve got this piece of information, but I have no idea what to do with it”. I felt that this perspective as a peer, instead of a member of staff who may be involved with the marking of assessments, helped students to open-up and share their experiences. As well as being able to empathise with students given my own experiences, the staff in the Café team also provided training to equip me with knowledge to support students in other ways, for example, how to deal with student disappointment when experiencing shock brought upon by a fall in grades when transitioning from A-level to Higher Education.

The Café facilitates dialogue around feedback, especially when students find themselves too confused to ask specific questions. Such difficulty during feedback interpretation often stops students, including myself, from using the feedback further. It is my experience that most students do not feel confident in approaching staff via email or office drop-in hours when they are “stuck” but are yet to reach a stage where they would have specific questions to raise. By providing students with a space to informally discuss their assessment, share how they do not understand the instructions or feedback, or even just to share their feelings about their grades, I have found the resulting conversations to be beneficial for students to start verbalising their thoughts to a member of staff and to start asking questions they may not have initially considered.

Collaboration with other university services is an additional advantage for signposting students to resources established by other services outside of the department (e.g. workshops provided by the library service regarding searching for literature or using software such as EndNote). These collaborations are mutually beneficial to all parties, as students acquire appropriate support without additional workload to departmental academics, while university services gain increased workshop attendance and thus increase their impact. Although this is not an essential feature of a functional Café, I think such a collaboration adds significant value.

Discussion

Surveying the perceptions of students regarding the Feedback Café allowed us to identify how the Feedback Café was both helpful and unhelpful to students, as well as the barriers to attendance.

Although the attendance rate was low, most students acknowledged the Feedback Café as a source of support. The awareness of support resources has a positive impact on students, even if the resource is not actively utilized, as a sense of security reduces feelings of stress (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Barriers to attendance included perceived lack of need, limited awareness, scheduling conflicts and discomfort approaching staff. Suggestions to boost attendance included scheduling adjustments to avoid clashes, better advertising to clarify the Café's purpose and structure, and highlighting the involvement of a student partner for those more comfortable speaking with peers.

Student partners bring valuable benefits to the Feedback Café. Collaboration between staff and students in the development and delivery of assessment and feedback support initiatives can foster a sense of partnership and shared responsibility for learning (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). As noted within the reflections from a student partner; by understanding departmental processes, student partners can offer insights to peers and contribute unique perspectives on student expectations. We were fortunate enough to have funding sources available to pay student partners for their time, but this initiative could be implemented as 'business as usual' by having rotating unpaid student partners e.g. academic student reps, so they benefit from learning more about assessment and feedback practices without taking up too much of their time. Alternatively, the cafe could just be run by staff.

In terms of helpfulness, the Feedback Café assisted students in multiple areas. The Café addressed student's questions relating to feedback and helped their understanding and interpretation of feeding as well as the application of feedback to make improvements in their work. The Café also proved useful when staff signposted to resources, providing assessment support, helping students understand marking criteria, and interpreting feedback. This helped students improve their work and internalize standards as demonstrated by the response:

"I felt like I had a better idea of what exactly to do better in my next report. I found it especially helpful that I was able to show my actual report and get very specific feedback on particular parts of my report and discuss how to push my marks even higher". [Year 2 undergraduate student]

Despite some evidence of assessment literacy in the students surveyed given some respondents indicated they didn't feel the need to attend the Café as they already know how to use their feedback, this wasn't the case for all students. Vague discussions and unmet needs were cited as aspects of the initiative which were perceived as unhelpful with students seeking more specific and actionable feedback, indicating that further efforts are needed to enhance assessment literacy within the department and establishing assessment literacy takes longer to learn than a single discussion.

Whilst the Café would not be sufficient as the only means by which a department supports students with assessment literacy, it would be a beneficial addition to a department's portfolio of assessment and feedback provision. The Café enhances feedback design and promotes student agency by fostering dialogue about assessment and feedback, aligning with Winstone *et al.*'s (2017) focus on agentic engagement and Evans' (2013) feedback exchange tools. The Café provides a practical element of feedback design to shift students' focus from the content of comments to actively using feedback, addressing needs identified by Dawson *et al.* (2019) and models like "Feedback Mark 2" (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Student responses in our study reflect their awareness of this shift from comments such as:

"Feedback Café filled in a special kind of gap in the feedback-feedforward loop where I understand the feedback given but don't know what to do next to improve. It helps to apply the specific feedback received from one assessment to a more general context for future improvements". [Year 3 undergraduate student]

We have incorporated the preferences and needs shared by respondents, along with the reflections and experiences of the staff involved in the Feedback Café and student partners, into a guide for those interested in implementing a Feedback Café initiative in their institution (Box 1).

To gain the most impact from this intervention we suggest the following steps:

1. Advertise the Feedback Café using university email and liaise with teaching staff to provide information about the Café during teaching activities. Advertisements should include information relating to: the format and structure of the Café; the staff and students who will be present; and details of how the Feedback Café will be beneficial to students.
2. Schedule the Feedback Café to run regularly (e.g. weekly or biweekly) during term time, aligning sessions with major assessment and feedback release dates while allowing time for students to review feedback first. Start in the first week of term and choose times that minimise clashes with timetabled commitments, potentially varying the schedule. Add the Feedback Café to the students centralised timetable to support students to manage their schedules.
3. Expect the focus of the Café to be providing feedback interpretation support, but also be available to provide pre-assessment support and answer assessment related questions, particularly in weeks when a new assessment is released. Be able to signpost students to resources to support independent learning.
4. Invite members of teaching staff to attend the Feedback Café who are related to ongoing assessments or feedback that has just been released. Invite student partners to join the Café to support students who may not feel comfortable talking to a member of academic staff. Invite university study skills staff (or equivalent) to share resources available to students to support action plans. Student partners should be chosen carefully and should be paid for their time (if included).
5. Locate the Feedback Café in a prominent space within the departmental building, to increase foot traffic and encourage spontaneous drop-ins. This location also serves to remind students of the support available as well as a reminder to students of their assessment and feedback.
6. Health warning: Consider the mechanisms that are in place should students flag a discrepancy in their feedback and marks. Those running the Café should have a good oversight of the programme and marking guidelines, as well as good assessment & feedback literacy themselves, ensuring that a consistent message is being shared.

Box 1: Process for implementing a Feedback Café

The study had a small sample size (12-13%), potentially explaining the low attendance rates reported (30-32%), which contrast with staff observations of increasing Café attendance. This growth may be linked to increased advertising during mandatory sessions early in the academic year, as students found teaching staff's promotion most effective (Figure 1). While most students found biweekly Cafés sufficient, we have since increased the frequency to weekly, where consistent scheduling likely boosted attendance. Familiarity with staff promoting the Café during sessions may have further contributed to this improvement.

Aside from the benefits of attendees of the Feedback Café as evidenced in this study, the Café itself will have its own limitations for its impact to the whole student cohort. For example, having a face-to-face conversation with staff in a public area of the building will not suit all students. Many students with social anxiety may refrain from utilising the service offered, instead preferring to work at home or in an online setting (Archbell & Coplan, 2022). In addition, whilst we make every effort to be inclusive to all, there could be certain students who would struggle to interact in the open space with possible distractions and background noise. Therefore, the Feedback Café, whilst mostly beneficial to those who attend, will have limits to its impact to the whole student community.

Conducted anonymously online, the survey relied on self-reported data, which can introduce bias or inaccuracies. Online surveys are more accessible and inclusive (Wright, 2017) but lack interviewer support for clarifications and are susceptible to issues like duplicate responses (Ball, 2019). The data may not capture the full range of the student experience as we did not collect identifying details such as attainment scores or gender. This decision avoided shifting students' focus towards grades and excluded gender-related effects, which were outside the study's scope. Consequently, we cannot confirm whether the respondents represent the broader cohort or if biases influenced participation.

Concluding remarks, next steps and Consequences for Teaching Practices

This study shares insights from running a Feedback Café and outlines a process for implementation. Reviewing the perceptions of students and staff highlights the Feedback Café's potential to enhance assessment literacy, feedback engagement, and practices in higher education while emphasizing the need to balance staff workload with student preferences. Although some students found written feedback sufficient, many valued the dialogue in the Café for better understanding and application of feedback. We recommend the Feedback Café as a low-cost, low-workload approach for fostering student engagement with feedback. While based on a single department, the initiative is adaptable to any program involving student feedback.

Ethical Approval

This study received ethical approval by the Faculty of Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee FREC. Ref: 2022-10863-11412.

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