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Feedback goes both ways

Students cannot learn properly if they are simply passive recipients of appraisals, say Naomi Winstone and Edd Pitt

The majority of practitioners working in higher education would agree that one of the principal aims of a university education is to develop students' independence, self-awareness and self-regulation.

Being positioned as passive recipients of their lecturers' feedback does nothing to promote the development of these crucial graduate attributes; such sustainable gains require the student to play an active role in seeking, generating, accessing and engaging with feedback opportunities from multiple sources.

Why, then, does the UK's National Student Survey evaluate the "quality" of assessment and feedback using a completely contrasting set of criteria that promotes a passive, transmission-focused approach?

Moreover, if the NSS sends the implicit message that this model of feedback is the one that we value, why shouldn't students themselves internalise this as their own model of the feedback process? Indeed, many institutions

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model their course evaluation instruments on the NSS questions. So from the very start of their degrees, students are being invited to see themselves as consumers of feedback comments: a mindset that arguably limits the potential impact of feedback on learning gain.

Nor are students overly impressed with our provision of feedback on these terms. Since the inception of the NSS in 2005, the vast majority of institutions see their students' satisfaction with assessment and feedback lagging behind satisfaction with other areas of the educational experience. The results for the revised 2017 survey were no exception.

So what is to be done? One response would be to develop our feedback practices with a primary focus on improving students' satisfaction with them. When we run workshops discussing innovations in assessment and feedback practices, we are frequently asked whether particular innovations improve NSS scores. Should this be our primary

focus? Or should we be more concerned about whether the innovation enhances students' use of the feedback and learning gain, even if that does not immediately translate into better NSS scores?

The NSS was reformed for 2017, but the section on assessment and feedback saw only minor semantic changes. For example, question 11 changed from "I have received detailed comments" to "I have received useful comments". But this tweak was a missed opportunity to promote a sector-wide shift from a transmission-focused to a learning-focused model of feedback. The main issue is not whether comments are perceived to be useful rather than detailed. The bigger problem is the use of the term "received". Students potentially have access to a limitless pool of feedback opportunities during their time at university, but this is a resource to be drawn down and implemented through a process ultimately driven by the students themselves, not something to be merely "received".

Of course, amending NSS questions is unlikely on its own to shift the dominant model of feedback in higher education; that is likely to require broader dialogue between educators and students, initiated at the very beginning of students' programmes. However, it would send a powerful signal to both parties about their respective roles if the question were, instead, to be something along the lines of: "I was supported to gather and use the feedback that I needed to help me in my learning."

Promoting a model that places emphasis on access to, rather than reception of, feedback is likely to be beneficial to student learning for several reasons. One is that it communicates that feedback can come from multiple sources: educators, peers, learning advisers and even students' self-assessment.

In addition, such an emphasis encourages students to consider when and where they need feedback, and to seek it in those situations. This is an important element of self-regulation. In the absence of such an approach, we are likely to be fighting a losing battle, in terms of both students' sustainable learning and our own NSS ratings.

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Academics have never entirely trusted students not to cheat. Few exams, for instance, have ever been conducted without an invigilator prowling the aisles in search of surreptitious copying or smuggled-in notes. But the current level of institutionalisation of students has reached such a pitch that it seems reasonable to call it a moral panic.

Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* defined this sociological phenomenon as occurring when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests". Youth culture – street-fighting and rockers in the 1960s, riotous, small-time "lager louts" in the 1980s or ecstasy-ravers in the 1990s – has often been the focus of moral panics. Currently, hardly a week goes by without outraged reports in the academic press about students plagiarising or cheating on exams. These stories add to the impression that such behaviour is increasingly rife, eroding the moral fabric of academic life.

The ubiquitous use of plagiarism-detection software is one symptom of the panic. Just a decade ago, we were promised that it would be used largely for educational purposes: to teach students how to avoid plagiarism. But it is pervasive; applied to all student work, even their PhD proposals. Everything submitted is now treated with suspicion.