



# Kent Academic Repository

Pitt, Edd and Winstone, Naomi (2025) *Three strategies to close the exam feedback gap.* . Times Higher Education Times Higher Education - Campus.

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/111660/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/three-strategies-close-exam-feedback-gap>

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

## Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

# Rethinking Exam Feedback: From feedback deserts to feedback ecosystems.

## Feedback deserts? How to close the exam feedback gap

Dr Edd Pitt & Professor Naomi Winstone

### Standfirst:

Exams are still a common choice of assessment, but do they really offer the feedback students need? Here's how to make exam feedback impactful

The use of exams in higher education remains widespread, driven in part by practical considerations, such as scalability and cost-effectiveness, rather than their pedagogical value. More recently, concerns about academic integrity in the age of generative AI have reinforced perceptions of exams as a secure and reliable form of assessment. Yet one issue remains persistently overlooked: the near-total absence of meaningful feedback on exam performance.

Exams are still widely seen as “[feedback deserts](#)”: spaces where students are tested but not taught. Unlike coursework, exam scripts are rarely annotated, explained or returned, so students often don't understand why they underperformed or how to improve next time. This gap disproportionately affects students from marginalised groups, deepening differential attainment gaps that are already [more pronounced in exams](#) than in coursework.

The good news? A growing body of research and practice shows that better feedback on exams is not only possible, but also urgently needed. Drawing on our recent synthesis of [research, policy and practice](#), here's how we can start to close the exam feedback gap.

### A four-part framework for exam feedback

- One useful starting point is to recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to exam feedback. We proposed a taxonomy based on two key distinctions: Is the feedback aimed at individuals or a wider group of students?
- Is it routinely provided or only given when requested?

This gives us four main categories:

1. **Individual provided** – personalised, given to each student automatically.
2. **Individual requested** – personalised, but only if a student asks.
3. **Generic provided** – general feedback for the whole class, given routinely.
4. **Generic requested** – general feedback available to those who seek it out.

Our analysis of assessment and feedback policies from 100 UK universities revealed that most institutions rely on the individual-requested and generic-provided categories of exam feedback, because they seem easier to manage. But these methods come with risks. They can

feel transactional, may not reach all students and often rely on students having the [confidence and cultural capital](#) to request support. The category of individual provided feedback is the most strongly supported by evidence, but the least used in practice. Providing individualised feedback to all students can feel daunting in terms of workload, but as we'll explore, there are scalable ways to make it work.

### Three practical strategies

So, what can institutions and educators do, especially when time and resources are tight?

#### 1. Make feedback a shared responsibility

Too often, feedback is seen as something *delivered* by academics to passive recipients. Instead, we should design feedback *spaces* where students actively engage in [understanding their performance](#).

Take for instance the “exam wrapper” approach. After an exam, students receive structured prompts to reflect on how they prepared, where they lost marks and how they could [revise more effectively](#). This can be done individually, in groups or via online tools. Studies show that such reflections increase metacognitive awareness and often lead to [performance gains](#).

Another example is the “exam autopsy”, where students compare their expectations and actual results, identify patterns in their errors and generate improvement plans. This approach has shown [stronger improvements](#) in subsequent performance than exam wrappers alone.

#### 2. Embed feedback into scheduled class time

If you're worried students won't read feedback comments, or that they take too much time to write, consider using class time for collective exam reviews. Two-stage exams are one option. Students complete the exam individually, then re-do selected questions in groups. This creates immediate opportunities for [peer feedback and discussion](#).

Alternatively, dedicate a short post-exam seminar to discussing common errors, model answers and improvement strategies. This can be accompanied by a basic marksheet showing performance by question or topic area, enough to [prompt useful reflection](#) without individual written comments.

#### 3. Don't overestimate the burden or underestimate the gains

Our survey with 116 UK academics revealed that the most common reason for not providing exam feedback is workload. And it's true that writing detailed individual comments on 200+ scripts isn't feasible for most, nor would it deliver the impact one would want. But many effective feedback practices don't require that level of effort. For instance, structured “exam wrappers” or [automated feedback systems](#) can reduce time while boosting impact. Other examples include allowing students to correct their own errors for partial credit or using Immediate Feedback Assessment Techniques in Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) exams to build understanding [during the assessment itself](#). Even sharing anonymised cohort performance data, such as question-level averages or common errors, can help students situate their own performance and [guide revision strategies](#).

## Avoiding exclusion in feedback practices

It's important to note that approaches which rely on students "requesting" feedback can unintentionally lead to exclusion. Research shows that students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds [may feel less confident](#) asking for support or may be unaware it's available. If feedback is only offered on request, or only to students who fail, it risks entrenching rather than reducing attainment gaps. Instead, exam feedback should be embedded as a norm in assessment design and applied equitably across the cohort.

## Looking ahead: from feedback deserts to feedback ecosystems

Exams are not going away, so we need to ensure they contribute to learning, not just grading. That means building feedback opportunities into exam processes from the start, rather than treating feedback as an optional extra. By reframing feedback as something students help generate, and by embedding it in scheduled time and scalable formats, we can begin to turn feedback deserts into more inclusive, supportive ecosystems.

Because the goal isn't just to measure performance, it's to help every student understand how to do better next time.

## References

- **Andaya, G. et al. (2017).** *Examining the effectiveness of a postexam review activity to promote self-regulation in introductory biology students.* Journal of College Science Teaching, 46(4), pp.84–92. [https://doi.org/10.2505/4/jcst17\\_046\\_04\\_84](https://doi.org/10.2505/4/jcst17_046_04_84)
- **Barnard, R.A. & Sweeder, R.D. (2020).** *Using online grading to stagger midterm exam feedback and create space for meaningful student reflection.* College Teaching, 68(2), pp.60–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2020.1713041>.
- **Campbell, P., Hawkins, C.D. & Osman, S. (2021).** *Tackling racial inequalities in assessment in higher education: A multi-disciplinary case study.* University of Leicester. <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/news/tackling-racial-inequalities-in-assessment-in-he-may-21.pdf>
- **Carpenter, T.S., Beall, L.C. & Hodges, L.C. (2020).** *Using a learning management system for exam wrapper feedback to prompt metacognitive awareness in large courses.* Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, 9(1), pp.79–91. <https://doi.org/10.14434/jotlt.v9i1.29156>
- **Carrillo-de-la-Peña, M.T. et al. (2009).** *Formative assessment and academic achievement in pre-graduate students of health sciences.* Advances in Health Sciences Education, 14(1), pp.61–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-007-9086-y>
- **Cramer, L. (2021).** *Alternative strategies for closing the award gap between white and minority ethnic students.* eLife, <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.58971>
- **DiBattista, D. et al. (2009).** *Grading scheme, test difficulty, and the immediate feedback assessment technique.* Journal of Experimental Education, 77(4), pp.311–338. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.77.4.311-338>
- **Ellis, R. & Barber, J. (2016)** *Expanding and personalising feedback in online assessment: a case study in a school of pharmacy.* Practitioner Research in Higher Education, 10 (1). pp. 121-129. <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/2476/>

- **Morrison, A., Machado, C. & Blackburn, J. (2024).** *Bridging the gap: Understanding the barriers and facilitators to performance for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic medical students in the United Kingdom*, *Medical Education*, 58(4), pp. 443–456.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.15246>
- **Owen, L. R. (2019)** The Exam Autopsy: An Integrated Post-Exam Assessment Model," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 13: No. 1, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsoitl.2019.130104>
- **Scoles, J., Huxham, M. & McArthur, J. (2013).** *No longer exempt from good practice: Using exemplars to close the feedback gap for exams*. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(6), pp.631–645.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.674485>
- **Wieman, C.E., Rieger, G.W. & Heiner, C.E. (2014).** *Physics exams that promote collaborative learning*. *The Physics Teacher*, 52(1), pp.51–53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1119/1.4849159>
- **Winstone, N.E. & Carless, D. (2019).** *Designing effective feedback processes in higher education: A learning-focused approach*. Routledge.
- **Winstone, N.E. & Pitt, E. (2025).** *Approaches to feedback on examination performance: Research, policy, and practice*. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2476622>