
THE EFFICACY OF FEEDBACK IN THE FIRST YEAR PROGRAMME: A COMPARISON OF THE VIEWS OF STUDENTS AND STAFF

FINAL PROJECT REPORT JULY 2007

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Feedback has been defined as 'information about the gap between actual performance level and the reference level, which is subsequently used to alter that gap'. It is now widely acknowledged that feedback forms an essential part of the learning cycle, allowing students to assess their performance and make improvements to future work. However, despite acceptance of the importance of feedback by academics, results from the recent National Student Survey (2005) have highlighted students' general dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive. The purpose of this study was to examine the efficacy of feedback on the first year of the Biological Sciences degree at the University of Leicester, by comparison of the perceptions of students and staff on a number of aspects of the current feedback process. Although a structured approach to giving feedback is encouraged within the School of Biological Sciences, there will be remaining differences in the way staff and students conceptualise the roles of feedback and its format.

The views of students studying on the 1st and 2nd years of the Biological Sciences degree were ascertained using a questionnaire addressing various aspects of feedback including, quantity, timing, use and quality. The response rates to the questionnaire were high for both years and the views of students with a range of academic abilities were represented; statistical analysis showed the data obtained to be reliable. In addition, focus groups were used to further explore the views of 1st year students. Semi-structured discussions were led by non-teaching staff, allowing for an informal environment to encourage full participation from students with a range of academic abilities. Staff views on the feedback process were sought during semi-structured one-on-one interviews, again allowing an informal environment for discussion. The staff cohort comprised the majority of 1st year module course convenors, a group of 1st year personal tutors, representative of most departments within the School of Biological Sciences and staff from the Student Learning Centre.

The main findings for each aspect of the feedback process addressed in this study are summarised below:

- ◆ Types and function of feedback: Written feedback via the formal school feedback sheet and annotations on scripts was perceived as the primary source of feedback by both students and staff. Verbal feedback was seen by students to come primarily from interactions with demonstrators in practical classes. Reliance of the students on this interaction for feedback was apparent but its importance was not acknowledged by the majority of staff. Student and staff views of the function of feedback were consistent, being seen as the provision of information on areas for improvement of either a current or future assignment.
- ◆ Quantity of feedback: Students were generally positive about the quantity of feedback received, with 1st year students showing a greater reliance on quantity than 2nd years. The majority of staff considered that students received sufficient feedback; however, there was no direct evidence for this as staff do not receive formal student evaluation of feedback practice at a modular level.

- ◆ Timing of feedback: The views of students on the timing of feedback appeared to be influenced by module specific thinking. It was apparent that 1st year students had a greater reliance on receiving feedback from previous work, prior to submission of their next assessment. Staff were aware of the importance of returning feedback as quickly as possible and this was generally achieved; however some staff also acknowledged that delays in giving feedback did occur. There was disagreement between students and staff as to whether feedback received after a module had finished could be used in future modules, with staff being more likely to consider that it could.
- ◆ Use of feedback: No formal guidance is currently given to students on the Biological Sciences Degree as how to recognise, use and understand feedback. Student participants acknowledged that they looked at the mark first when receiving feedback, however, the majority of these students also then read the feedback comments and filed them for later reference. Staff were divided in their opinion of the extent to which students utilise feedback. There was evidence of some students using a 'feed-forward' approach with the feedback received, but staff could not identify how 'feed-forward' practice could effectively be introduced to a greater extent into short modular courses. Students linked learning and feedback in a positive way and perceived that when 'feed-forward' had been practiced an improvement in marks had been seen.
- ◆ Quality of feedback: Students were positive about the clarity of feedback received which, in general, used language that was understandable to them. Both students and staff agreed that feedback should contain a balance of both positive and negative comments. Students perceived that feedback showing them what was wrong in a piece of work was most helpful to them for improving subsequent assessments. The majority of students and staff did not however, acknowledge the equal importance of indicating what was correct in a piece of work. Students viewed feedback to be good at pointing out errors but not at giving guidance on how to improve what was wrong. Inconsistency in feedback provision was a further major weakness identified by both students and staff and was seen as a problem, both within and between modules. This weakness was additionally identified by personal tutors as a problem when using feedback sheets to monitor progress of personal tutees.

The study reported here has successfully achieved its aims in providing a comprehensive comparison of the perceptions of students and staff of the current feedback process on the 1st year of the Biological Sciences degree. In addition, it has also highlighted some important differences in the views of 1st and 2nd year students on the feedback they receive. With the effectiveness of feedback being highlighted as a result of the outcome of the National Student Survey, the findings of this research will be disseminated to staff, with the following recommended points for action.

- ◆ To address inconsistencies in feedback provision by moderation of feedback comments by course convenors.
- ◆ Inclusion of the training of students in the use of feedback in key skills modules.
- ◆ Introduction of formal student evaluation of feedback at a modular level.

- ♦ Increasing the approachability of feedback providers by inclusion of (legible) contact details on the School feedback sheet.
- ♦ Increased utilisation of personal tutors for giving feedback on exam performance.

It is hoped that these recommendations will help the continued optimisation of feedback and assessment practices on the Biological Sciences degree and further enhance the student learning experience.

1.0: INTRODUCTION

Feedback has been defined as 'information about the gap between actual performance level and the reference level, which is subsequently used to alter that gap' (Ramaprasad, 1983). The importance of feedback to student learning has been confirmed in a number of studies (Hattie et al, 1996; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Hattie and Jaeger, 1998) and it is now generally accepted that feedback forms an essential part of the learning cycle. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) argue that 'formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower students as 'self-regulated learners' and discuss the conditions under which assessment supports learning. The importance of providing feedback that is understandable, timely and that students can act on is emphasised as an integral part of the development of students as 'self-regulated learners'. However, despite general acknowledgement of the importance of feedback to learning and development, the recent National Student Survey (2005) has highlighted students' general dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive. Results from the survey showed that whilst students were very satisfied with the quality of courses, feedback provision, in terms of quantity, quality and timing was amongst the lowest rated of all aspects reviewed, across the entire HE sector.

Although feedback from formative assessment can be given in many different forms (Hyland, 2000) as student numbers have increased, direct interactions between staff and students have inevitably declined, leading to a greater reliance on written feedback. Academic staff devote considerable amounts of time to providing feedback to students but it is unclear to staff to what extent the students engage with the feedback provided and whether the intended messages are transmitted successfully. It has been suggested (Higgins et al., 2001) that feedback may not be effectively used by all students due to differences in how students understand feedback and therefore make sense of their assessments. Indeed, some students may need to develop their ability to use feedback (Sadler, 1989). This issue was also addressed by Orsmond et al., (2002) who suggested that for feedback to be effective there needs to be a common understanding by both staff and students of the purpose of feedback and how it can be put into practice. These findings supported those of Wojtas (1998) who also reported that improvements in students work resulted from an understanding of the purpose of feedback and assessment criteria.

Higgins et al., (2002) argue that although students may recognize the importance of feedback to their learning, how they use feedback is not clearly understood. A number of reasons have been proposed as to why students do not fully utilise feedback (Wojtas, 1998); some students will only look at the grade given because it provides them with a clear, meaningful reflection of their progress (Ecclestone, 1998); some students will only read

feedback comments if the mark they receive is outside their expectations. However, an additional group of students may not read or take the feedback advice on board because they do not fully understand or realise the potential use of the comments (Chanock, 2000). Indeed, in a study reported by Duncan (2007) an important reason offered by students for not utilising feedback was a lack of appreciation that comments on one essay could help achievement in a later assignment. This thinking may be exacerbated by the modular structure of many degrees where students often do not receive feedback on assessed work until after a module has finished (Lea and Street 2000). One approach to try and overcome such effects of degree modularisation is the delivery of feedback in a form that encourages 'feed-forward' reflection by students, as suggested by Higgins et al., (2001).

The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Code of Practice on Assessment of Students (2000, p10) states that 'institutions should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement'. In addition, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have identified seven principles of good feedback practice, which they broadly define as 'anything that might strengthen the students' capacity to self-regulate their own performance'. However, although feedback which follows these guidelines is likely to be constructive, research has also shown that it has a limited effect if students do not actively engage with it and further, recommends the creation of feedback exercises that force students to actively engage with the feedback (Fritz et al., 2000).

This report describes the findings of a study examining the efficacy of feedback on the first year of the Biological Sciences degree at the University of Leicester. The School of Biology recruits about 185 students per year onto its undergraduate programmes, with 90 students following the biological sciences stream. Although a structured approach to giving feedback is encouraged within the School of Biological Sciences, there remains a range of variables which impact on how staff and students perceive the role of feedback; such variables include differences in staff approaches, differences in assessment format and differences in subject matter. The aims of this study were to compare the perceptions of students and staff on a number of aspects of the current feedback process on the 1st year of the Biological Sciences degree and on the relationship that this feedback has to student learning. With the effectiveness of feedback being highlighted as a result of the outcome of the National Student Survey, the findings of this research will be disseminated to staff, to ensure optimisation of feedback and assessment processes, and to encourage 'feed-forward' practices within the School.

2.0: METHODOLOGY

2.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The views of 1st and 2nd year Biological Sciences (BS) students on the current feedback system in use in the School of Biological Sciences were collected using an anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire used (Appendix 1) was a modified version of Gibbs Assessment Experience Questionnaire (Gibbs and Simpson, 2003), currently perceived as the 'gold standard', and comprised 27 questions regarding students' perceptions of various

aspects of feedback, including quantity, timing, use and quality. Responses were given using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The 'Feedback Questionnaire' (FQ) was posted on the University's virtual learning environment, BlackBoard™ for a total of nine weeks during Semester 2 (29/01/07 – 28/03/07). All the 1st and 2nd year students would, therefore, have experienced at least a full semester of teaching at their current level.

All students were contacted via e-mail to inform them of the project aims and to ask them to complete the questionnaire; participation was encouraged by entry into a 'Prize-Draw'. Response rates were monitored weekly, and non-responders contacted by e-mail at regular intervals in an attempt to further encourage participation. Although monitoring of the questionnaire site permitted identification of who had not responded, individuals' responses were not accessible. Following closure of the FQ, a reliability analysis was performed to determine Cronbach's Alpha using SPSS. In addition, analysis using Fishers Exact Test was performed on the data to establish any significant differences between 1st and 2nd year responses.

The management of the project was undertaken by a research assistant who was not involved in any aspect of teaching delivery within the School. Academic staff did not participate in recruitment of students or in conducting focus groups (see below) to obviate any likelihood of students' responses being biased by an academic presence.

2.2: Student Focus Groups

The views of 1st year BS students obtained from the FQ were further explored during focus groups. In an attempt to collate views and perceptions from students with a range of academic abilities, students were selected for focus group participation based on their degree class performance, as determined by end of Semester 1 (Jan 07) exams. Ten students were allocated to each of four focus groups so that the final composition of the groups would comprise two students from each degree class, with an overall gender balance. Focus groups were conducted over four consecutive weeks and selected students initially invited to attend by e-mail, with follow-up confirmation of attendance by e-mail and face-to-face contact where necessary. A semi-structured discussion format (Appendix 2) was prepared for use during the focus groups, based on aspects of the feedback system as covered in the FQ.

Focus group discussions were recorded both by note taking and the use of an MP3 recorder, with full transcription of the recording prior to analysis. Permission for recording of the focus groups and any subsequent use of material obtained was sought from each student through a Student Consent Form (Appendix 3) prior to the start of the discussion. In addition, all participants were anonymised by allocation of a student number and discussion transcripts were posted on BlackBoard™, for participants only to view, with the chance to amend details if they were deemed to be inaccurate.

Transcripts were analysed for areas of discussion relevant to the aspects of feedback that had been explored in the FQ. In addition, further themes identified during discussions were also grouped into subject areas (as described in Orsmond et al., 2005).

2.3: Staff Interviews

The views and perceptions of staff regarding the feedback system currently in use within the School of Biological Sciences were collated during one-on-one interviews with three groups of staff as follows:

Course convenors (CCs) for 1st year BS (n= 12) and 1st year Medical Sciences (MS; n=2).

Personal tutors (PTs) of 1st year BS students (non-first year teaching; n=7).

Student Learning Centre (SLC) staff with responsibility for BS students (n=1).

Staff were initially contacted by e-mail to explain the research aims and to ask for their participation in the project. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured discussion formats (Appendices 4.1 – 4.3) based on aspects of the feedback system covered in both the FQ and focus group discussions. Interviews were recorded both by note taking and the use of an MP3 recorder, with transcription of the recording prior to analysis. Permission for recording the discussions was sought prior to the start of the interview and confidentiality was ensured by anonymising staff in transcripts.

Transcripts were analysed for areas of discussion relevant to the aspects of feedback that had been explored with the student FQ and focus group cohorts. In addition, further themes identified during discussions were also grouped into subject areas (as described in Orsmond et al., 2005).

2.4: Ethical Approval

Ethical permission for the study was sought and obtained in accordance with the University of Leicester research protocol for non-clinical projects concerning human subjects.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1: Research Cohorts

3.1.1: Feedback Questionnaire Student Cohort

The FQ was posted on BlackBoard™ for a period of nine weeks and response rates monitored weekly. All 1st and 2nd year BS students not completing the questionnaire were

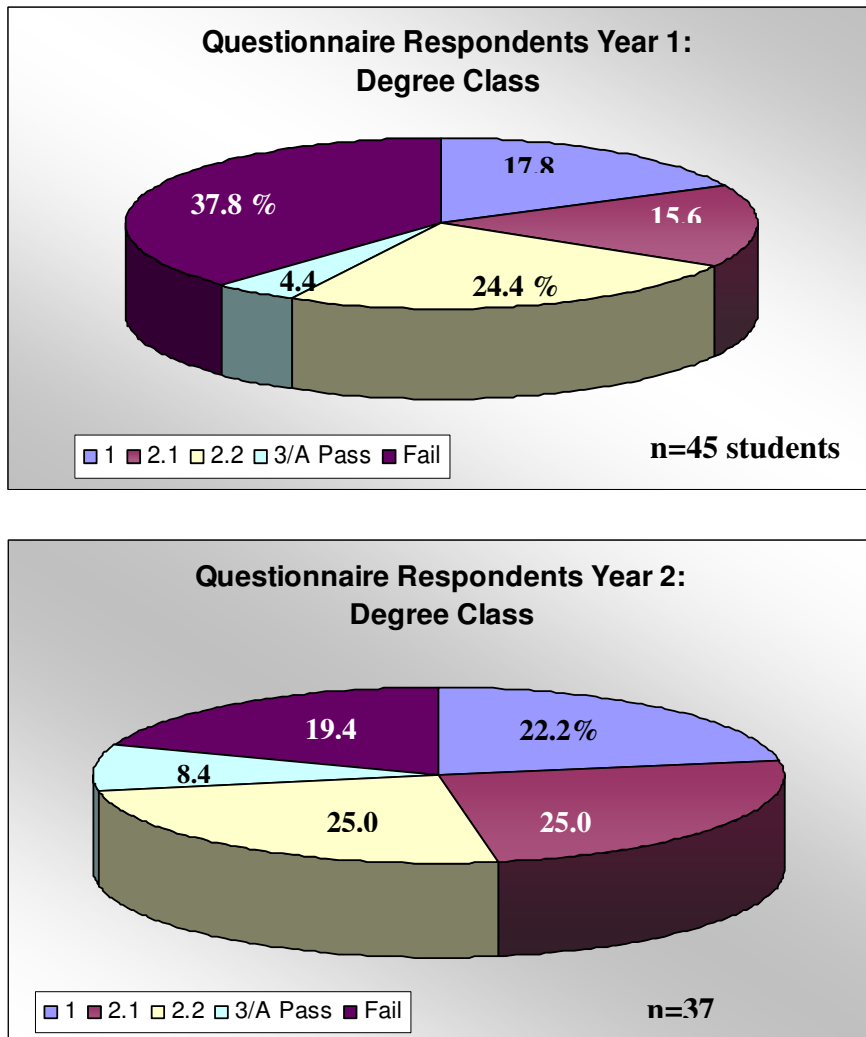


Figure 1: Final cohort of 1st and 2nd year questionnaire respondents by degree class.

contacted at regular intervals by e-mail and encouraged to participate. The final response rate for the FQ was 56.9 % for 1st year students (n=45) and 53.6% for 2nd year students (n=37), with a combined response rate of 55.4%. A reliability analysis of the questionnaire data was performed using SPSS and a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.748 (n=26) was determined, indicating the questionnaire data to be reliable.

The 1st and 2nd year students completing the FQ were grouped according to degree class, as shown in Figure 1.

All degree classes were found to be represented in both the 1st and 2nd year FQ student cohorts. The 2nd year respondents were, in the main, evenly distributed across degree bands, with 1st class students being slightly over represented and 'Fail' students slightly under represented when compared with the year group as a whole (15.5 and 26.8% for 1st class and 'Fail' bands respectively). Although a greater proportion of 1st year respondents were representative of the 'Fail' band, this cohort had a slight over representation of 1st and 2.2 band students and a slight under representation of 3/A Pass and 'Fail' students when compared with the year group as a whole (13.6, 17.3, 7.4 and 45.7% for 1st, 2.2, 3A/Pass and Fail bands respectively).

3.1.2: Focus Group Student Cohort

A total of forty-one 1st year BS students were invited to attend one of the focus group sessions, representing 51.9 % of the year group as a whole. Of those invited, twenty students attended representing 25.3 % of the year group. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage uptake of the invitation to participate in a focus group, by degree class. Students in the 'First Class' degree band were most likely to attend (87.5%) their focus group, however reasonable uptake rates (33.3 – 44.4 %) were also noted for the lower degree class bands. The 'Fail' band was a fairly broad one containing students who had failed between one, and all, of their Semester 1 modules. No further differentiation in terms of number of modules failed was made for this group.

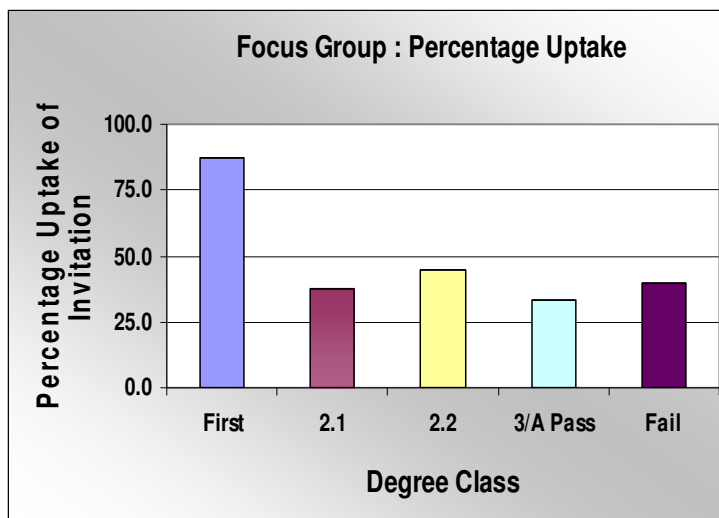


Figure 2: Uptake of invitation to participate in a focus group, by degree class. Students were allocated to a degree class following end of Semester 1 exams (First = >70 %; 2.1 = 60 – 69 %; 2.2= 50 – 59 %; 3 = 40 – 49 %; A Pass = 35 – 39 %; Fail = <35%). Percentage uptake for each group was found to be 87.5% for First Class degree band, 37.5% for 2.1 degree band, 44.4% for 2.2 degree band, 33.3% for 3/A Pass degree bands and 40% for Fail band.

Despite variations in take-up rates by students in different degree classes, the final student cohort for the focus groups had a good representation of all degree classes, as shown in Figure 3. The focus group cohort had a greater representation of students in the First Class degree band, and a lower representation of students in the 'Fail' band when compared with both the FQ 1st year cohort, and year group as a whole.

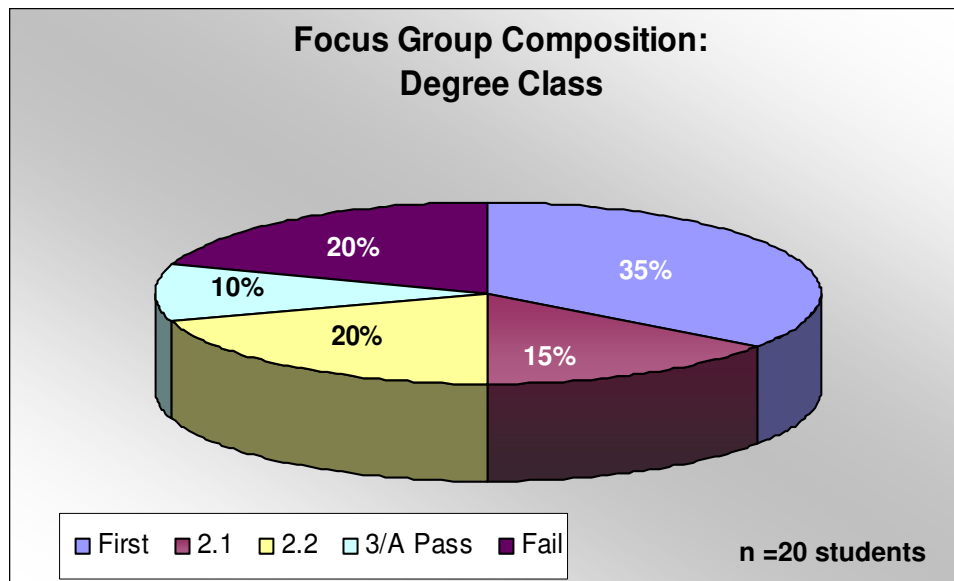


Figure 3: Final cohort of focus group participants by degree class.

Students were selected for the focus groups so that initially, each group was balanced in terms of degree class and gender. Of the students invited, females (52.2 %) were slightly more likely to attend than males (44.4%) however, the final student cohort for the focus groups had a M:F ratio of 1:1.5 which was representative of the year group as a whole (1:1.39).

3.1.3: Staff Cohort

CCs for all 1st year BS degree modules were interviewed (n = 12) in order to collate their views and perceptions of the current feedback system. The 1st year BS degree comprises thirteen modules taught over Semesters 1 and 2. Modules BS1001 and BS1002 (Molecular Biochemistry and Macromolecules in action) are convened by one member of staff, as are BS1010 and BS1011 (IT and Numeracy Skills for Biologists). Where a module had co-convenors, at least one was interviewed. The convenor for module BS1020 (Study and Communication Skills) was not interviewed due to involvement as project leader for this study. Module BS1008 (Environmental and Evolutionary Biology) was unusual in being co-convened by two members of staff from different departments. Two additional CCs from the 1st year Medical Biochemistry degree, responsible for Modules MB1002 and MB1003 (Metabolism and Biochemistry Practicals) and MB1008 and MB1009 (Key Skills) respectively, were also interviewed.

In addition to their teaching, staff have further interaction with students regarding feedback through their role as a Personal Tutor. A second group of staff with personal tutees on 1st year BS but who were not involved in 1st year BS teaching were identified. From this group, ten PTs (two per department) were contacted by e-mail and asked to participate in the study. One-on-one interviews were conducted with seven of these PTs comprising, two members of staff from each of Genetics, Infection, Immunity and Inflammation (3I) and Biology and one member of staff from Cell Physiology and Pharmacology.

A third group of staff with potential input into the feedback system were identified as those from the SLC. Within the SLC, one member of staff routinely deals with queries from science students and a one-on-one interview was conducted with that person.

3.2: Assessment Formats and Feedback on 1st year BS Degree

Of the thirteen modules taught on the 1st year BS degree, nine use similar continuous assessment and feedback formats with between 15 – 25% of marks being awarded for practical write-ups, between 5 – 15% for tutorial work with combinations of verbal presentations, essay writing and tutorial participation, and 70% of marks awarded in the final exam. For the majority of these modules, written feedback is predominant and given to the students on their practical write-ups, presentations and essays through the formal School of Biological Sciences feedback sheets (Appendix 5). The feedback sheet has recently (Jan 07) been re-designed in order to encourage staff to more easily identify areas of strengths in a piece of work and to suggest points for improvement in an attempt to encourage 'feed-forward' practice by students. Module CH1070 (Chemistry for Biologists) uses continuous assessment through two MCQ exams and a final exam. No formal feedback is given during assessment but 1-1 drop-in help sessions are timetabled. Module BS1005 (Genes) also timetables a 1-1 drop-in help session for students. Modules BS1010 and BS1011 (IT and Numeracy Skills for Biologists) utilise a continuous weekly assessment, submitted online, with feedback initially being given in the form of an overall score with model answers being posted on Blackboard™ at a later date. A timetabled drop-in help session is also available on this module prior to submission of each assessment. Module BS1020 (Communication Skills) uses formative assessment through course work and tutorials with no formal feedback given.

During one-on-one interviews, CCs were asked for background information regarding the types of staff involved in giving feedback to students on their module. Many of the modules running practical classes utilise PhD students as demonstrators, with varying levels of academic support. Some of these modules also provide a marking scheme for the demonstrators to follow. Moderation of a proportion of the scripts is carried out by module convenors according to the Schools code of practice, however, whether this also encompasses moderation of associated feedback was not commented on by CCs. Tutorials are invariably run across all modules using academic and post-doctoral members of staff.

3.3: Perceptions of Feedback

3.3.1: Focus Group Discussions

At the start of the focus group discussions, student participants were asked to

'think about what you see as feedback, what are the different types of feedback that you've experienced [on the course to date]'. Their answers to this were written on a flip-chart and used for reference during the remaining discussions.

All students readily identified written feedback via the formal School feedback sheets for practical write-ups and essays, and when prompted, for feedback from oral presentations. In general, annotations on scripts were not identified as a form of feedback until later in the

discussions. Verbal feedback was also identified by students, in the main coming from demonstrators during practical classes. However, students also viewed contact with Personal Tutors as being a source of verbal feedback. None of the students interviewed had experienced any significant verbal feedback immediately following oral presentations, either from the tutor leading the session, or from their peers.

3.3.2: Staff Interviews

During the one-on-one interviews, CCs were asked for 'their perceptions of what students regarded as feedback'. Formal written feedback on the School feedback sheets and annotations on scripts were identified by all convenors, and summed up by CC4,

"The written feedback, because it's given in a formal setting, they can't take as anything else".

Although CCs in general regarded interactions with demonstrators and practical leaders in lab classes as giving students (verbal) feedback, staff opinion was divided as to whether students appreciated this. Some CCs were unsure, as typified by a comment from CC4,

"They [the students] are probably less aware of the direct help they get by talking to people in lab classes, I think",

whereas other CCs identified the importance of this type of feedback and that the students acknowledged it as such (CC8)

"[lab interactions] are the most useful in terms of students' appreciation of things like concepts that you are trying to explain. I think just the nature of handling the number of students in 1st year practicals means we can't give immediate feedback in terms of what the correct answer was, but concepts, approach and understanding the bigger picture, they should leave [the practical] with that as feedback".

3.4: Feedback Definition and Function

3.4.1: Focus Group Discussions

The function of feedback from the students' perspective was discussed during focus groups, with participants being asked 'what do you think the purpose, or function of feedback is on your degrees'. All students immediately identified the main function of feedback as helping them to improve their next piece of work, as illustrated by S11,

"Is it to take it in and improve future work, because they've told you what you've done wrong so you don't make the same mistake again?",

and S10,

"That's the main point isn't it, just to improve, to get things better".

S14 identified the use of feedback to point out misconceptions,

"I suppose there might be sometimes where you've not quite understood it and they might ask you to go away and look at it some more".

When prompted, all students acknowledged feedback could also be used to show strengths and weaknesses in a piece of work, to justify the grade given and to highlight general errors in spelling, punctuation and referencing.

3.4.2: Staff Interviews

For comparative purposes, both CCs and PTs were asked 'how would you define feedback'. All members of staff defined feedback in terms of giving students an appraisal of their performance, as CC3,

"I guess feedback is exactly what it says, it's giving students information about their performance in a piece of work, obviously with a view to them improving or maintaining their level"

or PT5,

"In terms of assessed work, it's our opinion of what they've presented. It's what used to be called marking".

Other CCs defined feedback in formal and informal terms, as CC10,

"Feedback comes in any form at all....anything that constitutes communication between us and the students where we try to be supportive, whether that means correcting them or congratulating them".

Only CC9 defined feedback as a two-way process,

"It's a process where one assesses not just the performance of the student but also the quality of the teaching".

Alongside their definition of feedback, CCs and PTs were also asked 'what do you consider the function of feedback to be'. All the staff interviewed linked feedback to informing the student of their performance in a particular task, and to providing information on how to improve in subsequent pieces of work, as CC7,

"Well, they are to deduce from the bad points that are highlighted where they are to do better, and deduce from the good points that are highlighted what they are doing right and to carry on doing it",

or PT4,

"To identify areas of weakness and to encourage the students to perform to their full potential...".

CC2 considered that the function of feedback,

"...was entirely dependant on the student, and highly variable between individual students",

with the students most needing motivation from feedback, not using it. Further, CC11 added,

“I think the function is at either end of the spectrum. It’s useful in picking up and indicating to people that they are seriously adrift, and it’s also useful for people who are doing extremely well, to indicate that they are doing so”.

3.5: Aspects of Feedback

The following section of this report details views and perceptions of 1st year BS students, CCs and, where appropriate PTs, with regard to individual aspects of feedback. Data obtained from 1st year responses to the FQ and during focus group discussions is presented in comparison with data from one-on-one interviews with CCs and PTs. A separate comparison of 1st and 2nd year responses to the FQ is detailed in Section 3.10.

3.5.1: Quantity of Feedback on 1st year BS Degree

3.5.1.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The FQ contained four questions relating to the quantity of feedback received on the BS degree. The responses of 1st year BS students from the FQ are detailed in Table 1 (also represented in graphical and tabular form for 1st and 2nd year students in Appendix 6.1).

	Percentage of Total Responses				
	SA	A	NAD	D	SD
Q1: On this course I get plenty of feedback on how I am doing.	8.9	57.8	20.0	11.1	2.2
Q4: I don’t like to receive too much feedback	0	4.4	13.3	53.3	28.9
Q5: The feedback on my assignments is usually too uninformative or brief to be helpful	4.4	31.1	40.0	22.2	2.2
Q6: The more feedback I receive the more I learn	31.1	57.8	8.9	2.2	0

Table 1: ‘Feedback Questionnaire’ responses from 1st year BS students regarding aspects of the quantity of feedback received on 1st year BS degree. Figures represent the percentage of total responses (n= 45). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NAD = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Students were, in general, positive about the quantity of feedback they received, with 66.7% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with Q1, 'On this course I get plenty of feedback on how I am doing'. It was also clear that students appreciate receiving plenty of feedback, with 82.2% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with Q5 'I don't like to receive too much feedback'. This was supported by responses to Q6, 'the more feedback I receive the more I learn' with which, 88.9% of students either agreed or strongly agreed, showing that students linked feedback with learning in a positive way. The response of students to Q5, 'The feedback on my assignments is usually too uninformative or brief to be helpful' was mixed, with no clear view being apparent, although only 24.4% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

3.5.1.2: Focus Group Discussions

Focus group participants were also asked, 'In general, do you think there is enough feedback on the course'. There was a less clear response to this question than was expected from the FQ results. Some students supported the FQ findings, as S10,

"Yeah mostly I'm happy with the amount of feedback. If sometimes it's a little vague, especially with the practical reports, but personally I'm happy",

and S17,

"If it's all completed properly, then yes".

However, others did not agree that there was enough feedback which, despite the students having been asked to think in general terms, may have been module directed criticism, as S1,

"Not really. For example [module name] you don't get any feedback specific to you. It's a general overall feedback which isn't really that good".

When asked about the quantity of feedback on the course, students in all focus groups invariably commented on the inconsistencies in the feedback they received; this may have been a contributing factor to the mixed response for Q5 of the FQ. The key comments from students in the focus groups, were that when feedback sheets contained points for improvement and scripts were annotated in a clear way to indicate mistakes, then they were happy with the quantity of feedback given. However, as suggested by S17 and S1 above, this did not appear to be happening in a consistent way, especially with practical write-ups. This point was summed up by S16,

"Sometimes they [feedback comments] are helpful but sometimes it's comments like when you get say 60[%] in a practical report and they tell you it could be 'better written'. But you've done all that you can to write it to the best of your ability, so it's kind of vague, I don't know where to improve".

This was a recurring theme throughout focus group discussions, and is dealt with in more depth in the Quality of Feedback section (3.5.4) of this report.

3.5.1.3: Staff Interviews

The views of CCs on the quantity of feedback on their module were explored by asking whether ‘the students feel they get enough feedback on the module’. Most CCs replied that they had not received comments either way, and assumed students would address any such issues through the end of module questionnaire. However, the standard School end of module questionnaire does not address individual aspects of feedback and is often completed before coursework has been marked and returned. Although the majority of staff considered that students felt there was sufficient feedback on the modules, CC8 expressed the contrary opinion that feedback given in the 1st year, in general, was not sufficient,

“My overall feeling is that for 1st year courses [written] feedback is inadequate, it’s not as comprehensive as say for 2nd and 3rd year courses. That’s by nature of the numbers of students on the course and the fact that we re-use practicals and questions”.

3.5.2: Timing of Feedback on the 1st year BS Degree

3.5.2.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The FQ contained three questions relating to the timing of feedback received on the BS degree. The responses of 1st year BS students from the FQ are detailed in Table 2 (also represented in tabular and graphical form for 1st and 2nd year BS students in Appendix 6.2).

	Percentage of Total Responses				
	SA	A	NAD	D	SD
Q2: It doesn’t matter if a module has finished before I receive feedback as I know the advice will be relevant to my new module	4.4	46.7	33.3	15.6	0
Q3: The feedback usually comes back promptly	15.6	40.0	26.7	15.6	2.2
Q7: Whatever feedback I receive comes back too late to be useful	4.4	11.1	35.6	44.4	4.4

Table 2: ‘Feedback Questionnaire’ responses from 1st year BS students regarding aspects of the timing of feedback received on 1st year BS degree. Figures represent the percentage of total responses (n= 45). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NAD = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

First year BS students were generally in agreement with Q3, 'the feedback usually comes back promptly', with 55.6% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. There was also marginal agreement (51.1% either agreeing or strongly agreeing) with Q2, 'It doesn't matter if a module has finished before I receive feedback as I know the advice will be relevant to my new module' and to Q7, 'Whatever feedback I receive comes back too late to be useful' with only 48.4% of 1st year BS students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement.

3.5.2.2: Focus Group Discussions

Focus group participants were asked for their general views on the turn around time for feedback on the BS degree. Students readily identified differences in turn around times for different types of assessed work. By far the greatest numbers of comments were expressed about the turn around time for practicals, where the general theme of inconsistency both within and between modules was again highlighted. These were typified by S3,

"all that [turnaround time] depends on the demonstrator. This time we've had one who was taking sometimes two weeks to get them [practical reports] back. Another one has got them back on the Tuesday having had them on the Wednesday before. So it depends really on who you've got".

Students were particularly focused on receiving feedback from a previous practical report, prior to writing the next one in the series, as S2,

"The ones [modules] we have at the moment we have the practical on the Friday, it has to be handed in on the [following] Tuesday. So, you do it really quickly, you hand it in and if the demonstrator hasn't handed back the previous weeks on that Friday you don't have it over the weekend to improve the next one"

and S19,

"I think you should always get your practical report back before the next one, and some modules are very good at that and some aren't".

The turnaround time for feedback on essays and oral presentations appeared to be less of an issue for focus group participants, with comments having less 'urgency' associated with them, as S3,

"With essays and presentations it's [turnaround time] not too bad unless you've got another presentation coming up so you want to know how you did....so you don't make the same mistakes again".

However, one student (S2) expressed concern that the turnaround time from one essay had been too lengthy and had resulted in feedback not being available for revision purposes,

"I wrote an essay fairly early on [in Semester 1] in a tutorial, gave it in and didn't get it back until the beginning of this Semester [Semester 2]. I had an exam on the topic of my essay, but didn't have it to revise over Christmas".

The turnaround time for feedback from oral presentations was commented on least by students and although some complained of long delays in getting it back, as S6,

“I did a presentation last term and didn’t get anything back. I don’t even know my marks”,

the student had not taken any positive action to obtain the delayed feedback.

Some focus group participants supported the FQ findings in expressing the view that feedback given at the end of a module, or after a module had finished was still useful, as S13,

“It [the feedback] might be too late for that module but it can be usually applied to the next module”.

As a summary of the discussions concerning the quantity and timing of feedback, focus groups were asked, ‘Given a choice would you prefer detailed feedback more slowly or less detailed feedback more quickly’. Students were unsurprisingly divided in their opinions, as S4,

“I prefer more detail but it depends on individual pieces of work whether there’s enough to comment on. But I prefer it a little bit later and know what I’d done wrong rather than general comments about what was wrong”

and S19,

“If less detailed is a few points that will help you improve next time then it’s nice to get it back”.

In general, the overall opinion was summed up by S20,

“You don’t want essays of feedback, you want a few points but good points that will help you improve”.

3.5.2.3: Staff Interviews

During one-on-one interviews, CCs were asked (when appropriate to module structure) ‘what is the turnaround time for your module’. With practical write ups, most modules endeavoured to return scripts and feedback in time for the next practical session. However, whether this was always achievable in practice was highlighted by CC12,

“With practicals we endeavour to get the write-ups back to the students the next week. It doesn’t always happen because sometimes the demonstrators have other things on, and it takes a while to mark these things. That’s the general aim and it’s usually achieved”.

The turnaround time for essays was generally quoted by CCs as the School requirement of three weeks, with some CCs aiming for a quicker turnaround if possible. However, due to the structure of the modules in general, the majority gave feedback to students on their essay assessments after the module had finished. CCs were asked, ‘If the feedback doesn’t get to them [the students] within the module, would it still be useful to them’. Most CCs expressed the view that feedback comments received after a module had finished,

particularly those regarding essays and oral presentations, should be useful for the student in future modules. However, this view was not shared by CC8,

“Proper feedback, whether it be a mark or comments, is essential and the fresher it is in someone’s mind then they can correct what they know. I think above all, a priority in giving feedback is that it is prompt, but again that’s down to the priority that a department puts on its teaching”.

3.5.3. Uses of Feedback by 1st year BS Students

	Percentage of Total Responses				
	SA	A	NAD	D	SD
Q19: I have received clear and sufficient guidance on how to understand and use feedback	2.2	40.0	20.0	28.9	8.9
Q20: I read the feedback carefully and try to understand what is being said	26.7	64.4	8.9	0	0
Q21: I use the feedback to go back over what I have done in the assignment	11.1	44.4	28.9	15.6	0
Q23: I have good intentions to act on feedback I receive but forget suggestions for improvement next time I do coursework	0	28.9	26.7	40.0	4.4
Q24: I do not use the feedback when revising	6.7	24.4	40.0	24.4	4.4
Q25: I tend to only read the marks	0	8.9	22.2	51.1	17.8
Q26: My personal tutor discusses my feedback with me when we meet	6.7	17.8	42.2	15.6	17.8

Table 3: ‘Feedback Questionnaire’ responses from 1st year BS students regarding aspects of their use of feedback received on 1st year BS degree. Figures represent the percentage of total responses (n= 45). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NAD = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

3.5.3.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The FQ contained seven questions relating to the students' use of the feedback received on the BS degree. The responses of 1st year BS students from the FQ are detailed in Table 3 (also represented in tabular and graphical form for 1st and 2nd year BS students in Appendix 6.3).

There was no clear response to Q19, 'I have received clear and sufficient guidance on how to understand and use feedback', with 42.2% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing and 37.8% of students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. This may reflect the fact that BS students do not receive any formal guidance in this area, but it is possible that 1st year students may have considered advice given prior to University, or less formal advice from other sources on their degree, when answering in a positive way.

There was however, a very clear response from the students to Q25, 'I tend to only read the marks' with 68.9% of students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. This was supported by the results from Q20, 'I read the feedback carefully and try to understand what is being said', with which 91.1% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed. These results would seem to indicate that when students receive feedback they look at both the mark and associated comments.

Further uses of feedback were explored in Questions 21, 23 and 24 of the FQ. A small majority (55.5% either agreeing or strongly agreeing) of students indicated by their response to Q21, 'I use the feedback to go back over what I have done in the assignment', that their use of feedback extended beyond merely reading the comments. However, the extent to which students incorporated feedback into their next piece of work, ie. were using a 'feedforward' approach, was less clear from the response to Q23 'I have good intentions to act on feedback I receive but forget suggestions for improvement next time I do coursework', with only 44.4% of students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. There was also a mixed response to Q24, 'I do not use the feedback when revising', with 31.1% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing and 28.8% of students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement.

The extent of interaction with Personal Tutors in discussing feedback with students was explored in Q26, 'My personal tutor discusses my feedback with me when we meet', and appeared to be very variable, with 24.5% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing, and 33.4% of students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement.

3.5.3.2: Focus Group Discussions

Utilisation of feedback was also discussed during focus groups. Students were asked, 'In general, when you receive your work back with the feedback sheets, what do you do with it'. The majority of students agreed that the mark was the first thing that they looked at, however, what happened subsequently was variable. For some, the mark obtained would influence any further action, as S3,

“A lot of the time it’ll depend on the mark as to how much I do look at it [the feedback]. If I’ve got a really high mark I’ll tend to look and think ‘oh I’ve done well and just put it away. If I’ve got a really bad mark I’ll look and think what I’ve done wrong, why I got that mark”,

and S20,

“If I expect a mark, low or high, and it’s that, I don’t really read the comments. If I get a mark that’s really different from what I expected then I’ll really read the comments”.

However, for other students the mark had no influence over their use of the feedback, as S10,

“I don’t know if it [the mark] matters. If I got 50% I’d read through it, if I got 100% I’d still read through it”,

and S17,

“When I expect it [the mark] to be high that could be anything from 70% upwards. There’s a big difference between getting 70% and 90% so you look to see why”.

It also became apparent that when students received their work and feedback sheets, after looking through them individually they would also compare their work with that of their peers, as S2,

“When we get them back I tend to compare them with my friends and see what we’ve picked up marks from. I have friends who have different demonstrators so [we are] looking at how they’ve marked it. A few times we’ve had similar, we’ve talked about the same things, but got different marks so you can see if that person’s described it in a better way, or maybe your demonstrators not allocated as many marks for the same information”.

This practice was one which may have contributed to the students’ perceived inconsistencies in marking between demonstrators.

FQ data did not clearly define whether students were using a ‘feed-forward’ practice in their utilisation of feedback. This area was therefore explored further during focus group discussions. In general, when students were asked about their use of feedback, they appeared to describe a ‘feed-forward’ approach, as S7,

“I look at the mark and the improvements look through my script and file them away. Occasionally I’ll look back at them, when I’m doing the [next] report I’ll look at last weeks to see what I can do differently”.

The concept of ‘feed-forward’ was explained to the students during discussions, and students were asked whether they had identified the ‘feed-forward’ box on the School feedback sheet. Most had identified the box, but its use had not been explained to them. None of the focus group participants had used the box and, in general, were confused as to how it would work in practice, as S20,

“I don’t even know where I’d put that, if I did fill it in where would I take it?”.

Time pressures were also identified during focus group discussions to be a factor in utilisation of feedback by the students. All focus group sessions were held during the second semester and many students commented that they had felt unable to make full use of the feedback at that time due to their work load, as expressed by S1,

“They [the practicals] are crammed in and so you’re like ‘I’ve got the feedback, put it to one side, I’ve got to get this [next one] done, I’ve got to get it handed in. So you’re moving so fast you’re not having time to look at where you’ve gone wrong”.

and S4,

“It was one thing after another, you got one thing in then it was ‘Oh God I’ve got another one to do”.

However, some students also highlighted their intentions to revisit feedback as their workload lightened towards the end of the semester.

Students were also asked for their perceptions of what the staff thought they did with feedback. Responses to this were again variable with some students expressing the opinion, as S1,

“They probably think we don’t read it and just put it to one side”,

and S2,

“I’m sure some of them think they’re just doing it and it’s a bit pointless and you’re not going to look at it anyway”.

Other students expressed a more positive view, as in this exchange between S14 and S15,

“Presumably they would hope that we are going to read them [the comments] and use them in our next assessment” (S14) “and then if we have any problems, especially with the marks, then go and ask them” (S15)

and comment from S17,

“I suppose some of them [markers] must hope that if they bother to write something down then it gets read. But they must accept that there’s a great deal of variation between students”.

3.5.3.3: Staff Interviews

When asked the question ‘do students utilise the feedback they are given’, CCs and PTs were divided in their opinions. Some were very positive in their response and had seen clear evidence of improvement in students work following feedback, particularly in practical write-ups, as CC8,

“My experience is that feedback is definitely used, it’s a very constructive thing, a useful thing and a good proportion of students are using feedback”,

and CC3,

"I think we did see that with the practicals this year, with us being able to turn them around so quickly. We did see an improvement in the marks...just looking at my own group you could see they were improving for example their graph drawing skills".

Others expressed the view that the students' use of feedback would depend on how close the mark given was to that expected by the student, as PT2,

"I think it depends on what they [the student] were expecting and how close to what they were expecting was achieved.If it's a good mark they'll look for comments to see why they didn't get a higher mark, if its less than satisfactory then I suppose that's when the comments will be examined",

and CC13,

"I suspect it varies, some will read it all and come to see you to ask what it means. Others I suspect only read the marks and check there is not too much red ink....I think if the number reflects what they are expecting then they don't pay too much attention to it".

This view had been confirmed to be the case for some of the students participating in the focus groups. Staff also agreed with the students' views that utilisation of feedback by students was very variable, as CC12,

"I think it's very variable. I think the current students are so geared to passing tests that they see every piece of work as passing a test rather than a learning process.If they don't get the best possible mark and there are lots of comments on it then they feel they haven't done very well. They don't pay attention to the fact that doing the essay is a learning experience".

Some CCs and PTs expressed the opinion that although they considered that students did utilise feedback, proving that the source of any improvement in students work was due to the feedback given was difficult, as CC2,

"It's difficult to trace it [improvement] back and see where they acquired those skills from and it's also difficult to tie it specifically to any feedback they may have been given. I'm pretty sure that they do [utilise feedback] but it's a very hard thing to do, to prove an association",

and PT1,

"I'm not convinced. Some students will say 'oh I always read it [the feedback] and try and do something about it' but having evidence of that - the only way I can think of doing it is to have very short feedback cycles and have a documentary paper trail".

3.5.4: Aspects of the Quality of Feedback Comments on 1st Year BS Degree.

The FQ contained fifteen questions regarding various aspects of the quality of feedback given on the BS degree. These are grouped into related questions below and presented with relevant sections of focus group and staff discussions.

3.5.4.1: Clarity of Feedback Comments

3.5.4.1.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The responses of 1st year BS students from the FQ are detailed in Table 4.1 (also represented in tabular and graphical form for 1st and 2nd year BS students in Appendix 6.4.1).

	Percentage of Total Responses				
	SA	A	NAD	D	SD
Q8: The feedback I receive uses language that is easy to understand	15.6	71.1	11.1	2.2	0
Q11: I don't understand some of the feedback	2.2	22.2	22.2	51.1	2.2
Q12: Constructive criticism motivates me to improve	22.2	62.2	15.6	0	0
Q17: I have ignored negative or critical feedback	0	8.9	24.4	57.1	15.6
Q18: I find it more helpful to receive feedback about what I got wrong than on what I got right	17.8	31.1	35.6	13.3	2.2

Table 4.1: 'Feedback Questionnaire' responses from 1st year BS students regarding aspects of the clarity of feedback comments received on 1st year BS degree. Figures represent the percentage of total responses (n= 45). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NAD = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Students were positive in their response to Q8, 'The feedback I receive uses language that is easy to understand', with 86.7% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. This response was generally supported by that to Q11, 'I don't understand some of the feedback', with which statement 53.3% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although the response to Q8 would suggest an expected higher response than this, Q11 did not define which aspects of the feedback were being questioned and therefore the students may have found it to be ambiguous.

There was also a positive response from the students to Q12, 'Constructive criticism motivates me to improve', with 78.4% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement and to Q17, 'I have ignored negative or critical feedback', with which 72.7% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although the response to Q18, 'I find it more helpful to receive feedback about what I got wrong than on what I got right', was unclear, a slight majority of students were in agreement with the statement with 48.9% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing.

3.5.4.1.2: Focus Group Discussions

Aspects of the clarity of feedback were further explored during focus group discussions. Students supported the FQ findings in agreeing that feedback was written in language that was easy to understand. However, there were comments from a few students regarding the legibility of some of the feedback given, as S17,

"One of my essays I got back and the whole sheet was covered in text, and I had to spend half an hour deciphering it. It was very helpful once I'd written it out, but there are still two words I can't work out".

When presented with such illegible feedback though, students generally did not go back to the marker for clarification. The legibility of feedback may also have been one of the aspects considered by the students in answering Q11.

The response of the students from the FQ showed that they were motivated by constructive criticism, which was again supported by focus group participants, as S19,

"For one of the modules the first week I got 70[%] and she [the marker] put some improvement points. The next week I included those and she remembered and commented on it and I got a higher mark. That was good because it was the feedback working".

Students were clear however in their views that they do not ignore any negative or critical feedback, as expressed by S10,

"Obviously you get annoyed when people's feedback can be overly critical, and that can be detrimental. But for the majority [of feedback] it's positive I guess".

FQ data showed that students, in general, felt feedback on what they had got wrong was most helpful. This was supported in focus group discussions, with participants expressing the need to be shown clearly what they had got wrong in order to improve their next piece of assessed work. This was summed up by S17,

“Negative feedback, although it can be a bit sad is actually more helpful. Positive feedback is good for bolstering confidence, negative feedback is good for improving”.

3.5.4.2: Effectiveness of Feedback Comments

3.5.4.2.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The responses of 1st year BS students from the FQ are detailed in Table 4.2 (also represented in tabular and graphical form for 1st and 2nd year students in Appendix 6.4.2).

	Percentage of Total Responses				
	SA	A	NAD	D	SD
Q9: The feedback shows me how to do better next time	13.3	60.0	22.2	4.4	0
Q10: The feedback mainly allows me to compare how well I am doing in relation to others	8.9	28.9	26.7	36.6	0
Q13: The feedback helps me to understand where I went wrong	28.9	57.8	6.7	6.7	0
Q14: When I get things wrong I don't receive much guidance on what to do about it	11.1	35.6	24.4	28.9	0
Q15: Once I have read the feedback I understand why I got the mark that I did	8.9	44.4	28.9	15.6	2.2
Q16: I can seldom see from the feedback what I need to do to improve	4.4	31.1	22.2	40.0	2.2
Q22: The feedback does not help me with subsequent assignments	2.2	8.9	22.2	55.6	11.1

Table 4.2: 'Feedback Questionnaire' responses from 1st year BS students regarding the effectiveness of feedback comments received on 1st year BS degree. Figures represent the percentage of total responses (n= 45). SA = strongly agree; A = agree; NAD = neither agree nor disagree; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Data from the FQ indicated that the feedback given helped students improve their performance in subsequent assessments, with 73.3% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing with Q9, 'The feedback shows me how to do better next time'. This was supported by the response to Q22, 'The feedback does not help me with subsequent assignments', to which statement 66.7% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. There was also a positive response to Q13, 'The feedback helps me to understand where I went wrong', with which 86.7% of students either agreed or strongly agreed, and to Q15, 'Once I have read the feedback I understand why I got the mark that I did', with a smaller majority (53.3%) of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

The positive responses obtained to Questions 9, 13 and 15 would seem to indicate that students felt feedback helped them to understand where they had gone wrong in a piece of work and showed them how to improve future assessments. However, this was not reflected in their response to Q14, 'When I get things wrong I don't receive much guidance on what to do about it', with which only 46.7% of students either agreed or strongly agreed and to Q16, 'I can seldom see from the feedback what I need to do to improve', to which only 42.2.5% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. These apparently contradictory responses may indicate that although students feel that feedback is useful in pointing out errors, it may not be sufficiently effective in giving students guidance on how to correct those mistakes.

There was also an unclear response to Question 10 of the FQ, 'The feedback mainly allows me to compare how well I am doing in relation to others', with which 37.8% of students either agreed or strongly agreed and 36.6% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

3.5.4.2.2: Focus Group Discussions

The effectiveness of feedback comments given on the 1st year BS degree was discussed in greater depth during focus group sessions and provided some clarification of the apparent contradictions in the responses obtained in the FQ, as S20,

"To be honest, the forms that come back with the feedback don't help all that much. They may have points on where I went wrong, but no points on how to improve it".

This point was also picked up by S1,

"Sometimes the feedback is 'you haven't done it like this' but it doesn't give you any indication of how you can improve it. So you know it's not right but you don't know another way of doing it, you don't know how to improve it".

As discussed previously, a recurring theme that was highlighted throughout the student focus group discussions was the inconsistency of markers in filling out feedback sheets and annotating scripts. For each focus group, participants were asked to bring with them an example of feedback they had found useful and an example that they had not found useful. A typical example of 'good' feedback was discussed by S1,

“I got one [write up] which was 90% and she [the marker] was still like ‘you could improve it here or here’. It was quite a lot of comments considering it was a high mark and it was really good because it was ‘ok, that’s what I need to be doing”.

The examples of unhelpful feedback shown were, unsurprisingly, where work had been returned with blank feedback sheets, with only the mark written on them. When asked, students commented that this was not uncommon, but again was very variable between markers and modules. The lack of feedback comments did not seem to be related to the mark given, as commented on by S7,

“One of my friends had a higher mark than me and she got more comments than me in the ‘places to improve’. I had nothing and was like ‘well I need to improve and you don’t so why have you got the comments’. That’s what I was thinking”.

In addition, a lack of comments on the feedback sheet did not always appear to be replaced by a wealth of annotations on the script itself. Lack of annotation also seemed to contribute to an apparent uncertainty from the students as to how they had gained marks in assessed work, as commented on by S3,

“You don’t know what you got marks for so you don’t know what to include next time. As well as not knowing how to move on you don’t know how to get to the same place again”.

This may go some way to explain why students gave a mixed response in the FQ, when asked whether feedback helped them to understand their mark.

There was a definite appreciation by focus group participants of modules that provided marking schemes and/or model answers, which may have been a style of feedback they had experienced at A level, and one that they were more comfortable with, as S15,

“A levels gave you a marking scheme so you knew exactly how much to write, and if you didn’t the teachers had the time to write the correct answers”

and S13,

“I think you got more verbal feedback [at A level] the teachers would go through it with you whereas now you just get it back. You have to rely on what’s written”.

Focus group participants were also asked what action they took when presented with

little, or no, feedback or to feedback that they didn’t understand. Their response to this, which was consistent throughout all the discussions, was that they were generally reluctant to talk to demonstrators and especially course convenors about problems with feedback. Although there was less resistance to approaching demonstrators during practical classes, very few students would contact them outside of the session. In addition, students also highlighted what they viewed as a large variation in the approachability and the usefulness of information obtained from demonstrators, both within and between modules; their approach to dealing with feedback problems could be influenced by this perception, as S13,

“Sometimes when you go and see them [demonstrators] they don’t really say where you’ve gone wrong, but others will go through it step by step and show you where to improve it”.

Students also listed time pressures as a further reason for not approaching demonstrators or staff during practical sessions, as S2,

“Most of the time you don’t have time to talk about previous [write ups] because you’ve got so much to do in that experiment that you don’t have time to do anything else”.

3.6: Generic and Specific Comments

Although not part of the FQ, the views of students and staff on the usefulness of ‘generic’ and ‘specific’ feedback comments were explored during focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

3.6.1: Focus Group Discussions

Generic and specific feedback were defined for focus group participants with ‘generic’ comments being general comments regarding issues such as essay structure, referencing or use of English, that they could utilise in future assessments and ‘specific’ comments that dealt with topic-specific issues. Students identified that they had received general comments regarding their use of English, as S1,

“Some I’ve had are things like ‘there are some errors with English’ and it’s like they’ve said where but there’s no indication of where you could go to look it up or get help, that kind of thing. You’re like ‘well this is how I’ve done it all the time’ so if I’m meant to improve it then how”,

and regarding mistakes in referencing, as S6,

“He [member of staff] actually took a whole page of A4 and gave me examples of how to reference properly, and I just thought that was fantastic but a little too late. I must have handed in at least 8 essays and the 8th essay I get told how to reference properly”.

Handwriting was a further area identified by students, as S19,

“I got told to start word processing mine because my handwriting wasn’t good enough, and then I tried to read a comments of hers [the marker] and I couldn’t read any of it”.

Overall, students felt they received more generic than specific comments, but considered that both were helpful to them provided that there was a good balance.

When asked about ‘generic’ feedback, focus group participants also took it to mean general feedback given to the group as a whole, and seemed to be generally appreciative of this type of feedback, as S6,

“...for about the first ten minutes of a lecture, the lecturer would go through a practical that we had done and how we should have done it properly. That was good”,

and S2,

“The one [essay] that I’ve just done for my tutorial, I did it, got my mark back and then he went through in the tutorial all the things that should have been in it, which is really useful”.

3.6.2: Staff Interviews

CCs and PTs were also asked for their opinion on, ‘the value of generic versus specific feedback comments’, during one-on-one interviews. All staff considered that feedback should contain a mixture of both and (where appropriate) should be written on the scripts in as free form a way as possible, as CC12,

“I think the direct comments on the manuscript themselves are the most useful because they are dealing with a particular problem which is highlighted in the essay or the practical report and you can write in the margin whatever is necessary to write”,

and CC7,

“I mark the piece of work that I’ve got then I’ll provide comments that are appropriate to that piece of work. Isn’t it arbitrary to say some are general and some are specific, they all relate to that piece of work”.

This point was summed up by CC3,

“I think they [general and specific comments] are both important in that general comments are going to be more useful to them in the rest of their lives, if you like, whereas specific comments may not help them in anything else because it is specific to that particular piece of work which has been and gone and may never re-occur. I think it still needs to be said and done because it puts them right on that particular issue”.

3.7: Improvements to the Current Feedback System

3.7.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The final question of the FQ (Question 27) was left open and asked students, ‘to make any suggestions on how you think the value of feedback could be increased (what would you like to get from feedback that would help improve your learning)’. Of the 1st year respondents, a total of 22 (48.9%) students completed the question (Appendix 7.1) and of the 2nd year respondents, a total of 21 (56.8%) students (Appendix 7.2). The subject of each response was categorised and is discussed below for the 1st year respondents in comparison with focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews with CCs and PTs. A separate comparison of 1st and 2nd year responses is detailed in Section 3.10 of this report.

Responses to Q27 were analysed and recurring themes categorised into subject areas, as shown in Table 5.

Subject Area of Comment	Number of Comments
Improving the consistency of marking	4
Giving more information on how to improve future work	13
Make marking schemes and/or model answers available	5
Feedback on Exams	1
More general feedback to class	2
Information on key skills to be given at relevant times	1
Improve turnaround time for feedback	3
Improve legibility of writing	2
Other	2

Table 5: Categorisation of responses to Question 27 of the 'Feedback Questionnaire' from 1st year BS students. A total of 22 responses were obtained from 1st year BS FQ respondents, with some responses relating to more than one subject area.

The greatest number of comments received concerned the students receiving more guidance on how identified errors could be improved in future work,

‘It would be helpful if more detail was given into specific things that were wrong and how it could be improved. More annotations within the work would also be very useful so that remarks made can be directed to specific mistakes or strengths’

‘I think it is important feedback shows to students what they have to do for improvement. Not only to outline the strengths and [weaknesses] of the students’.

Other areas highlighted as important to 1st year BS students were, the provision of marking schemes or model answers to help identify where marks had been gained or lost,

‘feedback on work like essays and practical write-ups should have points on what the students have omitted, it should be straight forward and when needed, the right answers should be provided’,

and to improve the consistency of marking and provision of feedback between different markers and modules,

‘The amount of feedback given depends largely on the marker. For instance in some practicals the demonstrator will clearly give guidance as to what I did well and what could be improved but other demonstrators merely give a mark which is useless, without knowing what I did wrong or right the mark is useless’.

3.7.2: Focus Group Discussions

To sum up each focus group session, participants were asked, ‘whether you can suggest some positive aspects of the feedback system as it is, and any changes you’d like to see to it’. In general, students felt positively about the feedback system, as S10,

“Positive is that there is an attempt made at giving feedback”

and S14,

“It’s [feedback] there, even if you don’t want it at that specific time you can look back at it which may really help you further on when you were doing a similar assessment”.

Students also appreciated having contact with the person marking their work, as S4,

“It’s good that there’s a personal side to it rather than it being a faceless person writing down what you’ve got wrong. You can always go and ask someone”,

However, it was also suggested that contact details for the person marking the work and providing feedback should be formally recorded on feedback sheets, to increase their approachability. When asked about any changes they would like to make, students mainly identified improving the consistency of feedback, as S4,

“Inconsistencies in how you’re given feedback, from one you might get excellent feedback and from another not so good. You’re not sure where you stand on what feedback you’re going to get”,

and S2,

“If it’s followed as ‘strengths, suggestions for improvement’ as on the feedback sheet, if everything was like that then it would be great. It’s just when its not done like that”,

and S11,

“To make it compulsory that they do give some feedback because more often than not you don’t get any”.

The other main area of agreement for ‘improvement’ to the feedback system identified by focus group participants was to give feedback on exams, as S20,

“The major problem with feedback is that we don’t get any exam feedback. We get it for everything else, at different levels of usefulness, but the exams are the ones where I haven’t received anything”.

3.7.3: Staff Interviews

For comparative purposes, when summing up the one-on-one interviews, CCs and PTs were asked, ‘..whether you had any comments about the feedback system, or changes [to it] that you would like to see’. In the main, staff focused their comments on the recent changes that had been made to the School feedback sheet. Although opinion was divided as to whether the ‘new style’ sheet was an improvement on the old, the majority were positive about the changes that had been made, as PT3,

“Yes [it is an improvement] because it has more space for writing and less for ticking. It forces me to think positively first, so even if I had a bad answer the first thing I have to do is write what’s good about it and that’s helpful to the student receiving it. So I like that”,

and CC10,

“Yes it is quite definitely an improvement. The whole ethos of giving feedback is that it should be constructive and encouraging and so you shouldn’t be telling people what was wrong”.

However, a number of staff commented on the fact that when presented with a weak piece of work, they sometimes found it difficult to identify strengths, as CC13,

“It’s always difficult with a feedback form where you’ve got to pick out good things, and you can’t write anything in the ‘good’ box because they’ve done so appallingly”,

and CC7,

“I prefer the new sheets to the old sheets but I do find them a little restricting when you have to couch your criticisms in positive terms. I think it’s all a little politically correct, you

just need to point out where they are going wrong. It's not a big intellectual leap [for the student] to then decide how to put things right.

Other members of staff expressed the opinion that the 'boxed style' of the feedback sheet was restricting and that they preferred to write their feedback, containing both positive and negative comments, in a more freeform way. In addition, some staff commented that the feedback sheet was perhaps a slightly unnecessary 'add-on' to marking, as CC3,

"Yes, I think the new forms are better. Sometimes I think the easiest way to draw attention to things is to scrawl on the script itself, so to some extent I think the feedback form is an unnecessary add-on",

and CC12,

"The sheets that we have are OK, but for a member of staff who is doing their job properly they shouldn't be necessary because there should be enough feedback on the essay or report to do the job".

Inconsistency in the quality of feedback was one of the main concerns highlighted during focus group discussions with 1st year BS students. This was also commented on by a number of staff, as PT2,

"What we have obviously needs improving, but however good your system is, unless there is a will to deliver quality, positive, formative feedback to the students by the assessor, all the innovations we might have in feedback are not going to be any good",

and CC12,

"Unfortunately there are people who hardly write anything on an essay, give it a mark and that's it.so I think that the emphasis should be to drive home to staff the message that they need to write detailed feedback comments on the essays or practical reports"

CC2 suggested that improvements in feedback could only come from changes in student behaviour,

"We must not fall into the trap of believing that feedback is all staffs problem...staff can give bad feedback, or not enough of it, or too slow, but a lot more is down to the students attitude towards staff...whether they ask for feedback, what they do with it. We need to find ways of manipulating student behaviour so that student behaviour improves feedback. We have to work on staff behaviour as well...but we mustn't believe that staff can solve the students' problems, only the students can do that".

PT1 challenged whether the structure of the feedback system currently in place was effective in that it only provided limited opportunities for constructive feedback. PT1 considered that the timing of feedback was mainly at fault; students are not able to put feedback into practice within a module and therefore the opportunities for feedback to work are not being given,

"I think having more frequent opportunities for the students to make use of feedback [are needed]. I know staff take the feedback forms seriously, and certainly feedback on scripts and I think the students have an inkling that this is a serious issue. But I suspect that the fundamental issue with making it work better has to do with re-structuring, you can't bolt on feedback which is essentially what has been done".

3.8: Personal Tutor Involvement with Feedback System.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with seven PTs across departments within the School of Biological Sciences. The number of personal tutees allocated to the PTs interviewed ranged from two to thirteen, with PTs having between 10 months and 20 years experience in the role. PTs were asked, 'what do you perceive to be the role of a Personal tutor', to which there was a general consensus, as summed up by PT5,

"It [the role] varies depending on the student, on their needs and expectations. The functions are to do with a simple point of contact to talk to the student about their academic progress....then there's obviously the pastoral aspect for the students with problems...and the other one is planning and career advice".

PTs did not specifically identify involvement with the feedback system as being an integral part of the role. In a subsequent question, PTs were asked, 'what involvement does a Personal Tutor have with the feedback system', following which PTs acknowledged that they receive a copy of all feedback sheets for their personal tutees. In general, PTs read through the feedback sheets and use the comments and/or marks to monitor progress by the student, in order to identify any trends or problems.

Only two of the PTs routinely looked at the feedback sheets during meetings with their personal tutees, with most preferring discussion content to be student led. In addition, only two PTs had been approached by one of their personal tutees to resolve problems with feedback they had been given.

Several of the PTs interviewed also commented on inconsistencies in the quality of feedback given on feedback sheets. When few, or no, comments were written, PTs had very little information with which to assess performance of the student, as PT1,

"All you can act on are the written comments, which vary enormously....there are still some markers who write very little on the feedback form, in which case the only thing we have to go on is the mark",

and PT3,

"The other problem is that with feedback we only get the yellow forms and some of those are often difficult to readand if they [the marker] have written only one line on the sheet that I get back, then there might be nothing or a great deal written on the scripts which I don't see. So what I can work from is sometimes limited".

A further issue was highlighted by CC4 who commented on the problems associated with delays in getting copies of feedback sheets to PTs,

“I think one problem is that it’s often quite late in the day when PTs get feedback forms, too late to help students out with any particular issue they were having at the time”.

3.9: Involvement of the Student Learning Centre with Feedback

BS students also have potential access to feedback via the Student Learning Centre (SLC). To explore the role that the SLC may have in the feedback system, a one-on-one interview was carried out with one member of staff at the SLC who had responsibility for seeing students from the science faculties. The SLC has three main functions, (i) teaching on communication skills modules such as BS1020 or departmental workshops, (ii) development of resources such as PDF study guides and (iii) individual student consultations. Although no formal feedback is given on module BS1020, there are opportunities for giving feedback to students during individual consultations.

Students approach the SLC with a range of concerns related to their study, but the most frequent enquiry is regarding essay writing,

“Definitely the most common query we have is essay writing because it’s the commonest form of assessment and students are increasingly not used to that format, I think”.

Figures provided by the SLC showed that for the period Oct 06 – Mar 07 a total of four 1st year BS students had individual consultations concerning the areas of revision/exams, oral presentations and essay writing, and EFL/ESL (English as a first language/English as a second language). Although students utilise the SLC for a number of reasons, they are often motivated by a poor performance in an assessed piece of work. Some students are self-directed in accessing the SLC but others attend following suggestion to do so by members of School of Biological Sciences staff, either through feedback comments or through meetings with Personal Tutors.

In a typical consultation regarding, for example, problems with essay writing, both the assessed piece of work and feedback comments would be looked at, with a more detailed explanation of the feedback and ways to improve errors being given. In some cases, students were also encouraged to approach the marker for explanation of the feedback given, allowing them to match up the two sources of additional feedback.

3.10: Comparison of the Responses of 1st and 2nd Year BS Students

3.10.1: Feedback Questionnaire

The responses of 1st and 2nd year BS students to the FQ were analysed to assess any differences between their perceptions of and uses of feedback (results represented in tabular and graph form in Appendices 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4.1 and 6.4.2). Responses from the FQ were coded and scored prior to statistical analysis by SPSS using a 2-sided Fisher’s Exact Test. Results indicated that the 2nd year BS students responded in a statistically different ($P < 0.01$) way to 1st year BS students for all questions. In order to explore which areas of feedback showed the greatest differences between 1st and 2nd year students, the differences in scores between the two groups were ranked, as shown in Table 6.

The main differences in responses between 1st and 2nd year students were taken as those ranked in the top 5, which included one question each regarding the quantity (Q4), timing (Q2) and use (Q19) of feedback, and two questions relating to aspects of the quality of feedback (Q19 and Q16).

The greatest difference in responses between 1st and 2nd year students related to Q2, 'It doesn't matter if a module has finished before I receive feedback as I know the advice will be relevant to my new modules', to which 1st years were significantly more likely to agree than 2nd years. This may be a reflection of the way in which subsequent modules are linked in the 1st year to a greater extent than in the 2nd year. 1st year students may therefore find feedback given to them from a module that has finished of some relevance to the module they are currently studying.

The 2nd ranking difference related to Q19, 'I have received clear and sufficient guidance on how to understand and use feedback', to which 1st years were significantly more likely to agree than 2nd years. At the time of responding to the FQ, 1st year BS students would have mainly received feedback on practicals and short answers, which, by its nature is much easier to understand and use than that given on essays, which the second year respondents would have been beginning to experience.

The 3rd ranking difference in responses related to Q10, 'The feedback mainly allows me to compare how well I am doing in relation to others', to which 1st year students were significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year students. 1st year BS students would have been less likely to have formed strong peer groups at the time of responding to the FQ compared with those already established by 2nd years. 1st year BS students may therefore have been less likely to compare grades outside of their immediate 'lab groups' than 2nd year BS students

The 4th ranking difference between responses of 1st and 2nd year students related to Q4, 'I don't like to receive too much feedback', to which 1st year students were significantly more likely to disagree. This may reflect that 1st year students are less confident learners than 2nd years and therefore more reliant on feedback.

The 5th ranking difference between responses related to Q16, 'I can seldom see from the feedback what I need to do to improve', to which 1st year students were significantly more likely to disagree. This may again relate to the differences in assessment formats between 1st and 2nd year BS students, with 1st years more likely to receive feedback on short answers and practical write-ups that is relatively straight forward. The 2nd year students however, experience a greater number of essay-type assessments to which feedback may be more 'vague' in nature.

Ranking	Score	Questionnaire Number	Aspect	Analysis
1	34	Q2: It doesn't matter if a module has finished before I receive feedback as I know the advice will be relevant to my new models	Timing	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
2	28	Q19: I have received clear and sufficient guidance on how to understand and use feedback	Use	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
3	26	Q10: The feedback mainly allows me to compare how well I am doing in relation to others	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
4=	18	Q4: I don't like to receive too much feedback	Quantity	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
4=	18	Q16: I can seldom see from the feedback what I need to do to improve	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
5=	16	Q6: The more feedback I receive, the more I learn	Quantity	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
5=	16	Q8: The feedback I receive uses language that is easy to understand	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
5=	16	Q22: The feedback does not help me with subsequent assignments	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year

5=	16	Q24: I do not use the feedback when revising	Use	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q5: The feedback on my assignments is usually too uninformative or brief to be helpful	Quantity	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q7: Whatever feedback I receive comes back too late to be useful	Timing	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q11: I don't understand some of the feedback	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q12: Constructive criticism motivates me to improve	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q13: The feedback helps me to understand where I went wrong	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q15: Once I have read the feedback I understand why I got the mark that I did	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q18: I find it more helpful to receive feedback about what I got wrong than on what I got right	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
6=	14	Q26: My personal tutor discusses my feedback with me when we meet	Use	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
7=	12	Q1: on this course I get plenty of feedback on how I am doing	Quantity	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year

7=	12	Q3: The feedback usually comes back promptly	Timing	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
7=	12	Q9: The feedback shows me how to do better next time	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
7=	12	Q20: I read the feedback carefully and try to understand what is being said	Use	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year
7=	12	Q21: I use the feedback to go over what I have done in the assignment	Use	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
8=	10	Q14: When I get things wrong I don't receive much guidance on what to do about it	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
8=	10	Q23: I have good intentions to act on feedback I receive but forget suggestions for improvement next time I do course work	Use	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
9=	8	Q17: I have ignored negative or critical feedback	Quality	1st year significantly more likely to disagree than 2nd year
9=	8	Q25: I tend to only read the marks	Use	1st year significantly more likely to agree than 2nd year

Table 6: Ranking of differences in scores of responses to 'Feedback Questionnaire' by 1st and 2nd year BS students.

Responses to each question in the 'Feedback Questionnaire' were scored and differences in scores between 1st and 2nd year BS students calculated. Ranking – order of differences between scores for 1st and 2nd year responses in descending order; Score – total of differences in responses between 1st and 2nd year students; Questionnaire Number- number of question on the 'Feedback Questionnaire'; Aspect – aspect of feedback that question refers to; Analysis – result of statistical analysis using Fishers Exact Test.

3.10.2: Feedback Questionnaire Q27 Responses

The final question of the FQ (Q27) was an open question which asked the students, 'to make any suggestions on how you think the value of feedback could be increased (what would you like to get from feedback that would help improve your learning)'. Responses to Q27 from 2nd year students were categorised in the same way as previously detailed for 1st year students (section 3.7.1) and a comparison given in Table 7.

Subject Area of Comment	Number of Comments	
	1st Year BS	2nd Year BS
Improving the consistency of marking	4	3
Giving more information on how to improve future work	13	10
Make marking schemes and/or model answers available	5	5
Feedback on Exams	1	1
More general feedback to class	2	1
Information on key skills to be given at relevant times	1	0
Improve turnaround time for feedback	3	3
Improve legibility of writing	2	0
Enable peer comparison	0	1
Other	2	2

Table 7: Comparison of the subject area of responses to Question 27 of the 'Feedback Questionnaire' from 1st and 2nd year BS students. A total of 22 responses were obtained from 1st year BS and 21 responses from 2nd year FQ respondents, with some responses relating to more than one subject area.

In general, the categories of comments and number of each received from 2nd year BS students compared well with those from 1st year students. By far the greatest number of responses from 2nd year students, as from 1st years, concerned receiving more information in feedback as to how to improve future work. Marking schemes/ model answers and improving the consistency of marking were also commented on by a number of students in both years. One 2nd year student requested having information on how their performance compared with that of their peers, which had not been commented on by 1st year students. No comments were received from 2nd year students regarding re-scheduling of key skills lectures, or about the legibility of feedback received, as had been received from 1st year students.

4.0: Discussion

The aim of the study reported here was to compare the views of students and staff on a number of aspects of the feedback process currently in place on the BS degree, and to assess the relationship that this feedback has to student learning. Although previous studies have reported on feedback practice (Mutch 2003, Nichol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and its utilisation by students (Higgins et al., 2002, Orsmond et al., 2005, Weaver 2006) few have directly compared perceptions of feedback from both the staff and student point of view (Maclellan 2001, Carless 2006). The main focus of this research was therefore to carry out such a comparison in order to ascertain the efficacy of feedback on the 1st year BS degree. In addition, a comparison of the views and perceptions of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding feedback practice was also carried out.

4.1: Research Methodology and Study Group Cohorts

The methodology adopted in this study included utilisation of a 'Feedback Questionnaire' which was modified from Gibb's Assessment Experience Questionnaire, currently perceived as the 'Gold Standard' for this area of research. The FQ comprised 26 questions regarding students' views on a number of aspects of feedback, and one open-ended question which asked respondents to suggest changes which would increase the value of feedback. The FQ was open to both 1st and 2nd year BS students online via the virtual learning environment, BlackBoard™. Online data collection for student questionnaires is becoming increasingly utilised within the School of Biological Sciences and offers 'an efficient and convenient alternative to paper-based questionnaires where respondents are able to participate at their own convenience' (Lefever et al., 2006). Response rates for both 1st and 2nd year students were excellent (56.9% and 53.65 respectively) and exceeded those for the end of year questionnaire (27.6% and 26.9% respectively) which was also open via BlackBoard™ to the same student cohorts for a similar length of time, at the end of Semester 2. The increased response rates seen with the FQ could have resulted from both the careful monitoring of non-responders, allowing follow-up prompts to be targeted to specific individuals and the 'prize-draw incentive' used to encourage student participation. Reliability analysis of the FQ data gave a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.748, indicating the data to be reliable. In addition, 1st and 2nd year cohorts for the FQ comprised students from all degree class bands and therefore, data obtained were representative of students with a broad range of academic abilities.

The views of 1st year students expressed in the FQ were explored further during focus groups, using a cohort comprising 20 students (25.3% of year group) with a range of academic abilities, and a male:female ratio that was representative of the year group as a whole. Discussions were semi-structured in nature with question prompts constructed to cover aspects of feedback as in the FQ, and were lead by members of staff who were not involved in teaching within the School. This approach allowed flexibility of discussions and provided an informal environment in which the students felt able to give their views on all aspects of feedback, both positive and negative (Orsmond et al., 2005). The recording of focus group sessions did not, in the main, appear to restrict the discussions with students freely naming both modules and staff in their comments.

A semi-structured interview format was also adopted during one-on-one interviews with staff, with question prompts covering aspects of feedback as in the FQ. This approach again allowed flexibility during discussions and an informal environment in which to ascertain their views. As with the focus group participants, recording of the interviews did not, in the main, appear to restrict comments and only one member of staff declined to be recorded. Participation by 1st year BS course convenors was high, with only one co-convenor not taking part; the views of staff expressed in this report are therefore a good representation of those responsible for the teaching of and giving feedback to 1st year BS students. Personal tutors were less responsive to requests to take part in the study, however the final cohort contained members of staff from the majority of departments within the School of Biological Sciences, with a broad range of experience in the role.

4.2: Perceptions and Function of Feedback

The primary source of feedback identified by both staff and students was the formal written feedback given via the School feedback sheet and, additionally, through annotations on scripts. This is not unsurprising in light of the fact that the majority of feedback given and received on the 1st year BS degree is in this format. Other types of feedback received are potentially less obviously identified, as highlighted by Gibbs et al., (2003) who proposed that although staff would perceive verbal comments as feedback, students may not do so. In the study reported here, staff supported this view regarding student interactions with practical leaders and demonstrators in laboratory sessions as verbal feedback, but were divided in their opinion as to whether students also perceived it as such. In contrast to that proposed by Gibbs however, 1st year BS students identified interactions in practical sessions as their primary source of verbal feedback. Indeed, the reliance of the students on, and preference to use this source of feedback became very clear during focus group discussions. Staff recognition of the impact of this source of feedback on 1st years was not apparent during one-on-one interviews. Students stated that they were most likely to approach demonstrators during practical sessions for additional feedback or regarding problems with feedback they had been given, with contact outside of these times being more limited. This was suggested by students to be partly due to 'difficulties' in locating the demonstrators, especially following completion of a module and prompted the suggestion to include formal contact details on feedback sheets; this may also have the added benefit of increasing the apparent approachability of demonstrators. It was also clear during focus group discussions

that despite staff affirmations of their 'open-door' policies, 1st year students were very reluctant to contact course convenors either through e-mail and, in particular, face-to-face.

Contact with Personal Tutors was an additional source of verbal feedback identified by the students for obtaining feedback on their progress in general and on exam marks, but not on exam performance; this was one area of change to the feedback system proposed by students in responses to the open-ended question in the FQ and during focus group discussions.

Staff definition of feedback was found to be consistent and generally defined as 'giving students an appraisal of their performance in a set piece of work'. The main identified function of feedback from both staff and students' perspective was to provide information on how to improve the current and future pieces of work. However, although staff also recognised other more general functions of feedback such as identification of errors in spelling or referencing and justification of the mark given, students only did so when prompted.

4.3: Quantity of Feedback

Students were positive about the quantity of feedback they received on the BS degree and further, linked learning and feedback in a positive way. Although FQ data showed that 1st year BS students were significantly more likely to want more feedback than 2nd year students, this most probably reflects the fact that they are generally less confident learners and therefore more reliant on feedback. Staff also perceived that students were satisfied with the amount of feedback they received; however, no course convenor had direct evidence of this. The end of module questionnaire is most commonly used to address aspects of the running of modules on the BS degree but does not contain, as standard, questions relating to feedback; students would need to address any comments (positive or negative) concerning feedback in the section prompting them to name '3 good things' or '3 bad things' about a module. In addition, the end of year questionnaire only contains one generic question regarding feedback on the BS degree and does not address specific aspects. It may therefore be of benefit to both staff and students to introduce such an assessment of feedback at a modular level. This would not only provide an opportunity for students to express their concerns about feedback, but also, and equally importantly, to praise feedback practices and comment on any new feedback initiatives undertaken by course convenors.

4.4 Timing of Feedback

Students' views on the timing of feedback appeared to be influenced by module specific thinking, as focus group participants related delays in receiving feedback to individual modules or individual demonstrators. Staff from all modules aimed to 'turn-around' marking and feedback on practical write-ups for return to students prior to their next submission. The actual 'turn-around time' was dependent on module-specific assessment timetables and therefore varied between modules. First year BS students were appreciative of receiving prompt feedback which appeared to give them reassurance when writing-up subsequent work and were frustrated when it was not received in time. Some members of staff

supported the students' view in admitting that turnaround of marking and feedback could be delayed if markers (demonstrators) had a heavy marking load. In addition, the module-specific delays perceived by students were also highlighted by some of the staff who commented that delays in marking and giving feedback could be attributed to differences in the emphasis that some departments place on their teaching.

In contrast to practical write-ups, most feedback on essays and oral presentations on the 1st year BS degree is given after a module has finished, with turnaround being quoted by staff as the School requirement of three weeks. However, comments were again made by some staff that the emphasis placed on the promptness of marking essays and oral presentations may not be equal in all departments across the School. It is feasible, as previously reported by Hartley and Chesworth (2000) and Carless (2006) that students may consider that comments received after a module has finished can't help them improve as they are module specific and therefore won't support an assignment in a different module. This view was also reflected to some degree by students in the study reported here, however, staff did not agree with this perception. Although 1st year students were found to be significantly more likely to consider that feedback given after the end of a module would be useful in future modules than 2nd years, this may merely reflect differences in course structure between the two years, with subsequent modules being related to a greater extent in the 1st year than in the 2nd.

4.5. Use of feedback

At present, no formal guidance is given to students on the BS degree as to how to understand and use the feedback given, however, 1st year students were significantly more likely than 2nd years to consider that they had received such guidance. It is possible that when answering this question, 1st year students may have considered advice given to them prior to University or informal advice received from their peers on the degree. Also, feedback given to 1st year students is primarily on short answer questions or practicals which, by its nature, is much easier to understand than feedback on essays that is the primary form received by 2nd years. During focus group discussions, differences in feedback processes on the 1st year BS degree and those experienced at 'A' level were highlighted, with students expressing the view that they needed to be considerably more self-motivated towards utilising feedback on their degree course. In addition, changes in the focus of assessment types on the 2nd year of the BS degree result in differences in the type of feedback given, which may again require re-adjustment by students. It has been reported (Weaver, 2006) that students may need advice on understanding and using feedback before they can fully engage with it. Therefore, if feasible, it may be beneficial to both students and staff within the School of Biological Sciences to introduce some formal guidance on the feedback process, which may help smooth both transitions from 'A' level to 1st year, and from 1st to 2nd year.

One of the generally held preconceptions regarding students' use of feedback is that they are only interested in the mark awarded. The majority of our focus group participants agreed that the mark was the first thing that they looked for from feedback. As one member of staff commented though, 'students are now so geared towards passing tests that they

see every piece of work as a test rather than a learning experience' which may contribute strongly to this behaviour. Although some students admitted that their subsequent use of the feedback would depend on how close the mark was to that expected, most students were very keen to read the feedback comments on their work. However, one clearly expressed aspect that came across during focus group discussions was that at certain periods during the 1st year, students felt unable to utilise any feedback due to a high work load and resulting time pressures. There was also evidence that students used feedback to compare marked work between peer groups, although 2nd year students were significantly more likely to compare progress with peers than 1st years. This may reflect the fact that 1st year BS students would have been less likely to have formed strong peer groups at the time of responding to the FQ, compared with those already established by 2nd years. Inevitably, staff participants were divided in their opinion as to whether students utilised feedback; staff perceptions of students not doing so may have formed from some students not picking up marked work. It may therefore be beneficial to reassure staff of the use of and appreciation of feedback by the majority of students, which again could be achieved by student evaluation of modular feedback practice. There was agreement between staff and students who both accepted that there was a huge variability in the extent of use of feedback by students, with staff ultimately feeling that once provided it was the students' responsibility to act on feedback given.

A previous study (Duncan, 2007) has reported that one important reason why students may not utilise feedback is 'a lack of appreciation that comments on one assignment could help achievement in a later one'. The term 'feeding-forward' has been adopted (Higgins et al., 2001) to describe the process of utilisation of feedback to improve future work. As commented on above, in the study reported here there was a degree of disagreement between staff and students as to whether feedback comments from one module on the BS degree could successfully be 'fed-forward' into a different module. Although focus group participants were unaware of the terminology, during discussions some participants appeared to describe a 'feed-forward' approach to their utilisation of feedback. This approach may also have led to their apparent reliance on receiving feedback prior to writing up subsequent assignments. In an attempt to encourage 'feed-forward' practice amongst students, the amended formal School feedback sheet included a box for students to 'list points for improvement of future work' from the feedback they have been given. Although student participants were aware of the 'feed-forward' box, none had been told how to use it and several were unsure how it could be put into practice. Staff were also unsure how it could effectively be put into practice and although some considered it a useful concept, most were of the opinion that if the students didn't use it then it was redundant. None of the staff interviewed could easily identify how feed-forward practice could be effectively introduced due to the short modular structure of the BS degree which allows limited opportunities for formative feedback practices.

From the study data, it was encouraging to find that students on the BS degree linked feedback and learning in a positive way and this was re-enforced by some focus group participants who acknowledged that by acting on feedback comments they had seen an improvement in their grades. Although staff also acknowledged that they did see

improvements in students work following feedback, they thought it difficult to prove that improvements were solely due to students' utilisation of the feedback.

4.6. Quality of Feedback

One of the main aims of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the feedback that students receive on the 1st year of the BS degree. This was achieved through ascertaining views regarding various aspects of the quality of feedback given. In general, students were positive about the clarity of the language used by tutors when providing feedback, although inevitably there were some criticisms regarding legibility of writing. It was clear from students' responses that positive comments motivated them by bolstering confidence, but negative or critical feedback was not ignored. Students expressed the view that comments showing errors in a piece of work would help them most to improve their next assessment. However, it is of equal importance that students are also shown what was right with their work and where marks were gained, in order that they can at least repeat their performance in future work. This important point could be emphasised to students if they were to receive formal guidance on using and understanding feedback.

As discussed previously, the formal School feedback sheet was recently re-designed in order to more readily identify both strengths and areas for improvement in students work. Staff were, in the main, supportive of the changes made to the feedback sheet, generally acknowledging the importance of couching feedback comments in positive terms and appreciated that to firstly identify the strengths of a piece of work when marking was of benefit to the student. However, many staff also commented that they sometimes found it difficult to identify strengths in a very poor piece of work and write comments that did not sound banal. Staff agreed with the students in believing that negative comments should not be excluded from feedback and that there should be a balance between the two.

In general, students had the opinion that feedback they received on the BS degree was good at pointing out what was wrong with a piece of work but not for showing them where they had gained marks. This may have prompted students to propose the wider availability of model answers and marking schemes in response to the open-ended questions of the FQ and focus group discussions. In addition, students felt that when staff pointed out errors in a piece of work they did not always give enough guidance on how to improve it. First year students were significantly more likely to think that feedback showed them how to improve than 2nd years, which may again reflect differences in assessment formats between 1st and 2nd year BS students; first years are more likely to receive feedback on short answers and practical write-ups that is relatively straight forward than 2nd year students who experience a greater number of essay-type assessments to which feedback may be more 'vague' in nature. This aspect of the quality of feedback was commented on most frequently in the open-ended question of the FQ by both 1st and 2nd year students, who wanted to receive more detailed information in feedback on how to improve subsequent assessments. Although it was a common claim from staff that time pressures resulting from high student numbers on the 1st year of the BS degree meant that they did not have time to be more detailed in feedback, as one focus group participant commented, students 'do not need essays of feedback, just a few good points on how to improve'.

One of the main recurring themes to emerge from the FQ and focus group discussions was the concern of students regarding inconsistencies in feedback content. The majority of students interviewed fully recognised and appreciated the value of feedback given on the BS degree. However, they felt unable to rely on the consistency of feedback and were demotivated by either a lack of, or unclear, feedback. This problem was seen to be both within and between modules and was again highlighted by 1st and 2nd year students in responses to the open-ended question of the FQ and focus group discussions. It has been also been stated in a previous study (Duncan, 2007) that a lack of identified areas for improvement in feedback will mean that students will find it extremely difficult to 'feed-forward' to improve subsequent work. Some staff also commented on inconsistencies in feedback and suggested intervention at individual staff level to address the problem. In addition, lack of detail on feedback sheets was identified as a problem by personal tutors when using the feedback to monitor progress of personal tutees.

Within the context of promoting 'feed-forward' practices on the BS degree, the provision of generic and specific comments in feedback was addressed, with students being able to 'feed-forward' generic comments to improve future work. Previous reports have suggested that 'some students would find it difficult to un-pick the subject-specific or topic-content advice from the generic advice to improve future achievement' (Higgins et al., 2002). However, once defined for them, students within our study recognised the differences between generic and specific comments and considered both to be helpful provided that a good balance was achieved. Focus group participants also referred to 'generic feedback' as that given to the group as a whole regarding performance in an assessment. Students were appreciative of this type of feedback and found it helpful; generic feedback in this context could provide an opportunity to appraise students of their performance compared with that of their peers, as suggested in response to the open-ended questions in the FQ and focus group discussions. Staff also agreed that there should be a mixture of both specific and generic type comments in feedback, but were opposed to separating out the two types of comments when giving feedback, preferring to use them interspersed as necessary.

4.7. Additional Sources of Feedback on the BS Degree

The involvement of personal tutors in the feedback process on the BS degree was found to be variable, but overall fairly limited. All personal tutors interviewed for this study monitored progress of their personal tutees through the School feedback forms, but the majority did not routinely discuss feedback at meetings with their tutees. Only two of the personal tutors interviewed had been approached by their personal tutee regarding issues with feedback. There was also a suggestion that feedback sheets were not usually received in time for personal tutors to be able to act promptly to resolve any apparent issues.

The SLC also has a limited input into the feedback system on the BS degree. Students access the service in general following a poor assessment mark or following direction to do so from a tutor. During a consultation students would typically receive clarification of feedback comments or further advice on how to act on feedback comments. Students would also be encouraged to seek further discussions with the member of staff responsible for providing the initial feedback, if they had not already done so.

5.0: Recommended Points of Action.

Findings from this study were used to compile the following list of recommend action points which attempt to address the main areas of concern regarding the current feedback system for both staff and students:

- ♦ Moderation of feedback sheets: It was unclear from staff interviews whether the moderation of scripts by course convenors also included moderation of associated feedback. However, if uniformly practiced, this could go some way to addressing the issue of inconsistencies in feedback within departments and help identify poor practice that could be improved by additional training of staff involved.
- ♦ Training students in the use of feedback: At present, BS students are not given any formal training in recognising, understanding and using feedback. Inclusion of feedback training into the key skills modules may help a greater number of students to engage more fully with it. In addition, it would provide an opportunity to highlight the many ways in which students receive feedback on the BS degree, to encourage utilisation of feedback by practising 'feed-forward' and help to smooth transitions from 'A' level to 1st year and 1st to 2nd year. (Timing an issue for 2nd years – suggestions for getting around this?)
- ♦ Student evaluation of feedback: Evaluation of feedback on the BS degree by students is at present limited and appears as one generic question on the end of year questionnaire. A more detailed evaluation of feedback practices on a modular level could be introduced, addressing different aspects of feedback. This would provide an opportunity for students to express not only their concerns but also to praise feedback practices within the module and comment on any new feedback initiatives undertaken by course convenors. (vehicle for this? – timing an issue with end of module questionnaire as feedback given after questionnaire filled out. Also it is not required to be done every year. Suggestions for getting around this?).
- ♦ Approachability of feedback providers: Study findings showed that 1st year students are reluctant to approach staff to discuss problems, including those with feedback. Although some students would approach demonstrators during practical sessions, contact outside of these times or with course convenors was very limited, especially after a module had finished. It was suggested that contact with the member of staff marking the work and providing feedback could be facilitated by the formal inclusion of contact details (which are legible) on the standard School feedback sheet.
- ♦ Personal tutor role: The involvement of personal tutors in the feedback process is fairly limited at present, but has potential for greater scope. One of the suggestions from students for improvement to feedback on the BS degree was to introduce feedback on exam performance. As personal tutors are currently responsible for disseminating exam marks, this could be a possible extension of that function (not sure about this one??).

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Appendix 1: Feedback Questionnaire

Question Number	
1	On this course I get plenty of feedback on how I am doing
2	It doesn't matter if a module has finished before I receive feedback as I know the advice will be relevant to my new modules
3	The feedback usually comes back promptly
4	I don't like to receive too much feedback
5	The feedback on my assignments is usually too uninformative or brief to be helpful
6	The more feedback I receive, the more I learn
7	Whatever feedback I receive comes back too late to be useful
8	The feedback I receive uses language that is easy to understand
9	The feedback shows me how to do better next time
10	The feedback mainly allows me to compare how well I am doing in relation to others
11	I don't understand some of the feedback
12	Constructive criticism motivates me to improve
13	The feedback helps me to understand where I went wrong
14	When I get things wrong I don't receive much guidance on what to do about it
15	Once I have read the feedback I understand why I got the mark that I did
16	I can seldom see from the feedback what I need to do to improve
17	I have ignored negative or critical feedback
18	I find it more helpful to receive feedback about what I got wrong than on what I got right
19	I have received clear and sufficient guidance on how to understand and use feedback

20	I read the feedback carefully and try to understand what is being said
21	I use the feedback to go back over what I have done in the assignment
22	The feedback does not help me with subsequent assignments
23	I have good intentions to act on feedback I receive but forget suggestions for improvement next time I do course work
24	I do not use the feedback when revising
25	I tend to only read the marks
26	My personal tutor discusses my feedback with me when we meet
27	Please use this space to make any suggestions on how you think the value of feedback could be increased (what would you like to get from feedback that would help improve your learning)

Appendix 2: Student Focus Group Discussion Format

Notes:

Introduction - introduce interviewers, the study aims and what we hope the outcomes will mean for both students and staff. Stress that have no links with the teaching staff – am an independent ‘ear’ for their views

Student Consent – thank students for attending. Explain that they were invited by ‘random’ selection and so in order to get some background information about the group they will each be asked to fill in a Student Consent Form to give permission for session to be recorded and to allow use of material. This will take a couple of minutes at the start of the session and all details will remain confidential.

Confidentiality – explain that the comments made during the session are being taped but this is essential to obtain maximum information. However, they can be assured that all comments will remain anonymous and so they can speak freely. Students will be allocated participant numbers for transcripts which will be posted on Blackboard so that they have the chance to amend details they perceive to be inaccurate.

Session to be approx 45 minutes in duration

START RECORDING – let students know that session now being recorded

Let the students introduce themselves – state participant number for voice recognition during transcription.

Discussion Format:

Stress that we are looking for their views on all the types of feedback (eg. written and verbal) across all the modules that they have so far experienced.

Perceptions of feedback – (write answers on flip chart)

1. What do they perceive to be feedback (eg. written, intervention in lab classes, informal discussions with lecturer eg in corridor etc).
2. What do they perceive to be the function (purpose) of feedback (eg. identifying errors, explaining concepts that not been understood, correcting errors, to increase the learning experience, justification for the mark given).

grade/rank student achievement

motivation of learning

diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses

evaluation of teaching

Reserve Question: What do they perceive to be the value of feedback (attempt to encourage deeper learning, justifying the mark given, encourage / discourage student).

Quantity of feedback

1. Do they get enough feedback over the course as a whole (not just module studying at present).
2. Is there a balance between the different types of feedback given (do they get more of one type of feedback than another).
3. Explain the difference between Generic and Specific comments. Ask if there is a balance between the two types and which find more helpful (if any).

Quality of feedback

1. What type of feedback (written, verbal etc) do they find most helpful.
2. Is the feedback easy to understand (eg. language used, legibility of writing etc)
3. Does the feedback help them to understand the subject better.
4. Does the feedback show them how to do better in the next assignment.

Ask for some specific examples where feedback has helped them to learn, or made them re-think their approach to learning or in tackling assignments. NB: students asked to bring examples of feedback they have been given to focus group discussions.

Timing of feedback

1. Is there a quick enough turnaround on the feedback (if no - how quickly would they like to receive it back).
2. Are there differences between assessment types / modules.
3. Is the feedback received in time to be useful for learning (on the same module and for future assessments)

Use of the feedback

1. How do they use the feedback.
2. How do the students think the staff perceive that they use the feedback.
3. Do they ever do additional studying as a result of feedback received.
4. Explain 'feedforward' to students. Do they use the feedback comments (where appropriate) from past assessments when preparing the current assessment (ie do they feedforward).

Changes to feedback

1. What is good about the feedback system
2. What, if any, changes to feedback would they like to see.

Appendix 3: Student Consent Form

The Efficacy of Feedback in the First Year Programme: a Comparison of the Views of Students and Staff.

Project Team: Jon Scott, Alan Cann, Chris Willmott, Jo Badge, Ruth Bevan

Project Aims

The importance of feedback to student learning has long been recognised. However, results from the recent National Student Survey graded feedback, in terms of quality, quantity and timing, as one of the lowest of all the aspects reviewed. Although a structured approach to giving feedback is encouraged within The School of Biological Sciences, there remains a range of variables which impact on how staff and students perceive the role of feedback; such variables include differences in staff approaches, differences in assessment format and differences in subject matter.

The aims of this project are to compare the views of students and staff on a number of aspects of the feedback process for the first year Biological Sciences degree, and on the relationship that this feedback has to student learning. It is envisaged that the information obtained from the project will be disseminated to staff, to ensure optimisation of the feedback and assessment processes, and to encourage feedforward practices within the School.

Participant Name: (please print).....

Age:.....Gender:.....

I give my permission for the interview data collected today to be used in the preparation of written reports, presentations and published papers regarding the feedback process within the School of Biological Sciences. Participant codes will be used to identify interviewees in order to ensure that my identity and any comments I make remain anonymous. I understand that the interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be posted on Blackboard for Focus Group participants only to view. I will have an opportunity to amend any perceived inaccuracies.

Signed:.....

Date:.....

Interviewer signature:.....

Appendix 4: Staff Interview Discussion Formats

Appendix 4.1 – Course Convenors

Name:

Convenor for:

Date of interview:

Explanation of the project background and aims.

Background Information:

1. What types of staff are involved in giving feedback for this module
2. How many staff are involved in giving feedback for this module
3. How are the staff instructed in giving feedback in order to achieve consistency
4. What types of assessment are used on this module

Discussion Format

Stress that are looking for their views on all the types of feedback (eg. written and verbal) across their module.

Perceptions of feedback

1. What do you perceive to be feedback (eg. written, verbal, intervention in lab classes etc)
2. What do you perceive to be the function (purpose) of feedback (eg. identifying errors, explaining concepts that not been understood, correcting errors, to increase the learning experience, justification for the mark given)*.

- ◆ Grade / rank students' achievements
- ◆ Motivate learning
- ◆ Diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses
- ◆ Evaluate teaching

3. Reserve Question: What do you perceive to be the value of feedback (attempt to encourage deeper learning, justifying the mark given, encourage / discourage student).

Quantity of feedback

1. Do the students feel that they get enough feedback on the module
2. Is there a balance between the different types of feedback given (do they get more of one type of feedback than another)
3. Generic vs specific comments and the value of each.

Quality of feedback

1. What types of feedback do you feel that the students find most helpful / respond to
2. Do you see evidence that the students use feedback comments for their next assignment (ie. do they feedforward)
3. How could feedforward be incorporated/encouraged in the module

Timing of feedback

1. What turnaround time do you aim for on the module
2. Is the feedback given during the module – if not is the type of feedback given module specific or could the students use it for future assessments

Use of the feedback

1. Do students utilise the feedback
2. How do you think the students use the feedback
3. Do you see evidence of additional studying as a result of feedback being received

Changes to feedback

1. What, if any, changes to feedback would you like to see (to include any comments on new style feedback forms).

Appendix 4.2: Personal Tutors

Name:

Date of interview:

Explanation of project (what trying to find out and what hope to do with the research findings)

Background Information:

1. How many students are you personal tutor for.
2. On which courses are your personal tutees.
3. For how long have you been a personal tutor.
4. What do you perceive to be the role of a personal tutor.

Discussion Format

Stress that are looking for their views on all the types of feedback (eg. written and verbal).

Perceptions of feedback

1. What do you perceive to be feedback (eg. written, verbal, intervention in lab classes etc)
2. What do you perceive to be the function (purpose) of feedback (eg. identifying errors, explaining concepts that not been understood, correcting errors, to increase the learning experience, justification for the mark given)*.
 - ◆ Grade / rank students' achievements
 - ◆ Motivate learning
 - ◆ Diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses
 - ◆ Evaluate teaching
3. Reserve Question: What do you perceive to be the value of feedback (attempt to encourage deeper learning, justifying the mark given, encourage / discourage student).

Dealing with Feedback:

1. What involvement does a personal tutor have with the feedback system.
2. What action do you take when you receive the feedback forms.
3. Do you routinely discuss feedback forms with the students when you meet.

Use of the Feedback:

1. Do students utilise the feedback
2. How do you think the students use the feedback

Appendix 4.3 – Student Learning Centre

Name:

Date of interview:

Explanation of project (what trying to find out and what hope to do with the research findings).

Specific Information:

1. Role of student learning centre.
2. What type(s) of student(s) use the SLC services (overseas, UK).
3. Which courses and years most access service.
4. What services are most popular.
5. Do students return for additional consultations.
6. Do students attend more at particular times of year eg. before or after exams.

Feedback Related:

1. Do students look for additional support from SLC as a result of feedback comments they have received.
2. Do students look for additional support from SLC due to a lack of feedback comments.
3. Has a student ever discussed any problem with feedback they have received.
4. Any involvement with giving feedback on BS1020.
5. Any students with undiagnosed learning difficulties (where referred to eg. accessibility centre).
6. Definition and function of feedback.

Appendix 5: School of Biological Sciences –

Feedback on Assessed Work

Name:Module Code:Personal Tutor:

Type of Assessment: Essay Practical ReportPresentation
Other

Declaration: I confirm that I understand the University's regulations regarding plagiarism and that this is my own work. No part of this work has been copied from any other person's work (published or unpublished), and no part has previously been submitted for assessment.

Signed Date Submitted

Markers should ensure that adequate comments are made for student guidance

Strengths:

Suggestions for Improvement (2 or 3 specific points should be made):

Any Additional Comments:

Mark Awarded

Date

<p>Any problems should be addressed to the Module Convenor or Director of Studies</p>

Marker's Name:Signature:

Appendix 6: Feedback Questionnaire Responses

Appendix 6.1-Quantity of Feedback

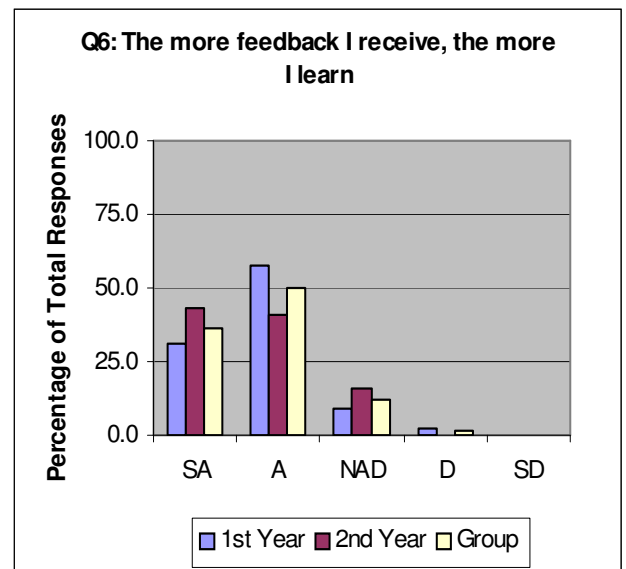
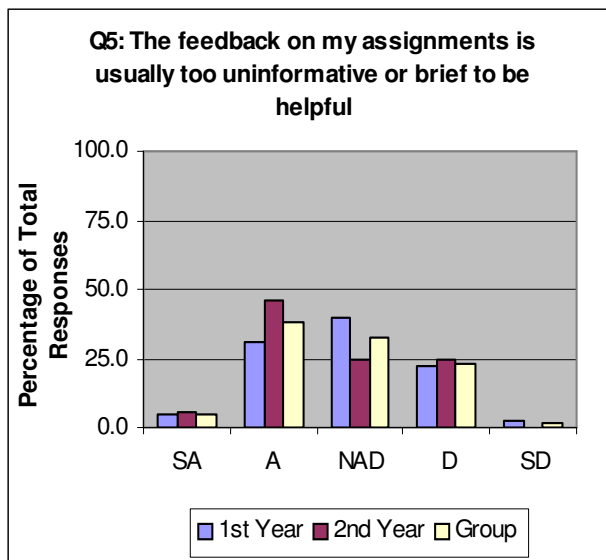
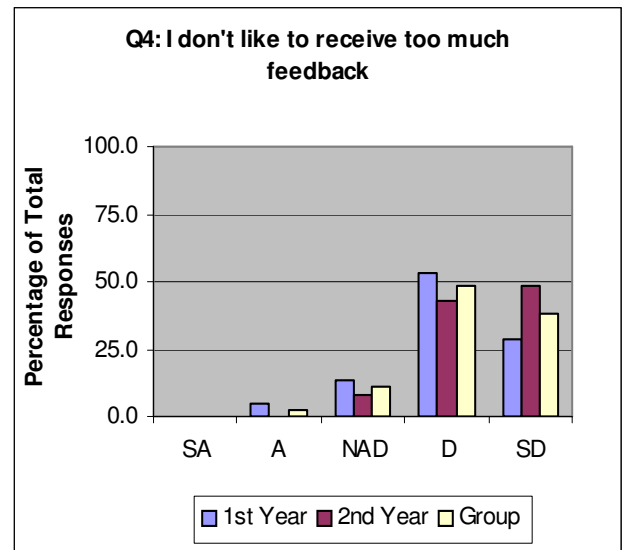
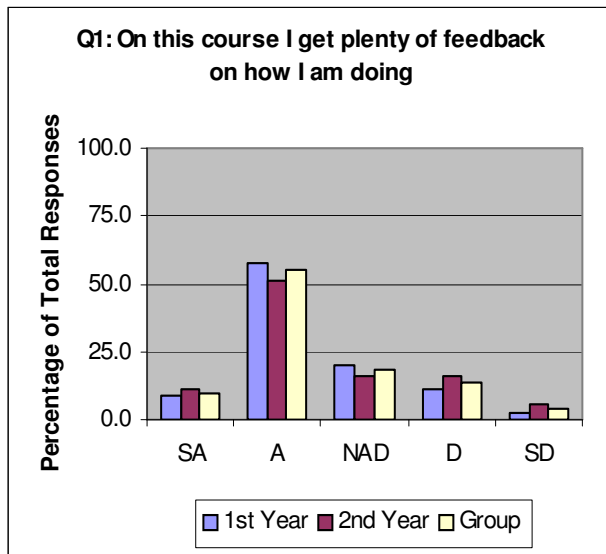


Figure A3

Figure A4

Figures A1-A4: Views of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding Quantity of feedback on the BS degree. Figures represent percentage of total responses for 1st and 2nd year students and the Group (total number of respondents) as a whole. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Q1	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	8.9	10.8	9.8
A	57.8	51.4	54.9
NAD	20.0	16.2	18.3
D	11.1	16.2	13.4
SD	2.2	5.4	3.7

Table A1

Q4	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	0.0	0.0	0.0
A	4.4	0.0	2.4
NAD	13.3	8.1	11.0
D	53.3	43.2	48.8
SD	28.9	48.6	37.8

Table A2

Q5	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	4.4	5.4	4.9
A	31.1	45.9	37.8
NAD	40.0	24.3	32.9
D	22.2	24.3	23.2
SD	2.2	0.0	1.2

Table A3

Q6	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	31.1	43.2	36.6
A	57.8	40.5	50.0
NAD	8.9	16.2	12.2
D	2.2	0.0	1.2
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A4

Tables A1-A4: Responses of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding aspects of the Quantity of feedback on the BS degree. Tables represent percentage of total responses. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Appendix 6.2 – Timing of Feedback

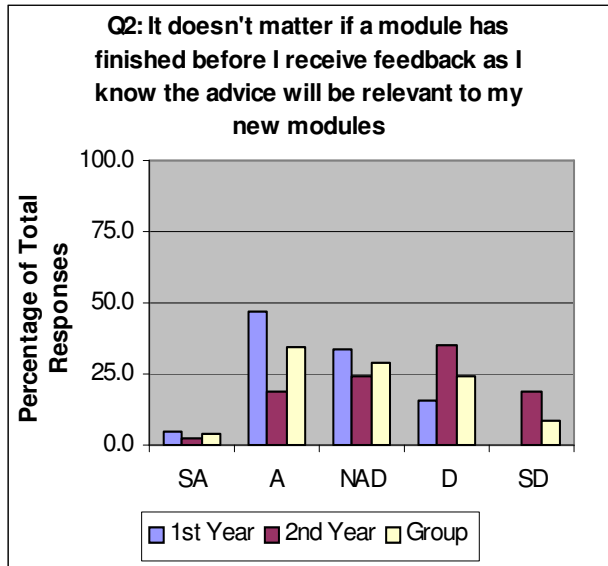


Figure A5

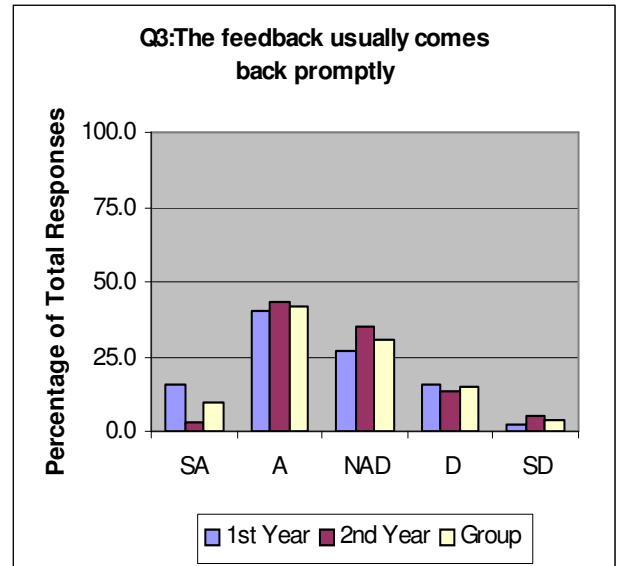


Figure A6

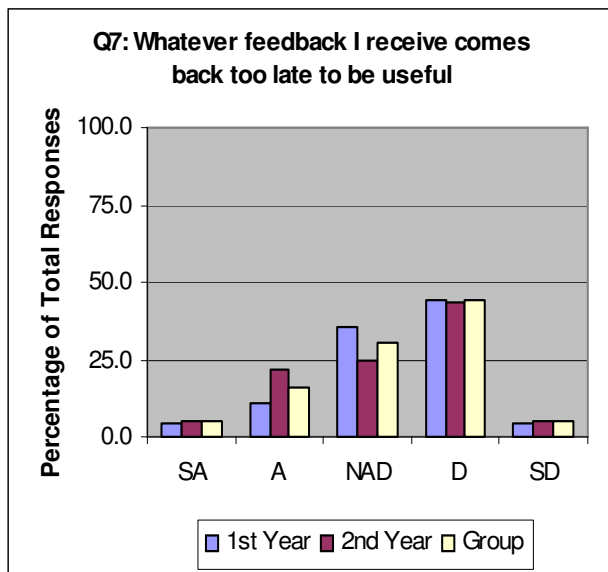


Figure A7

Figures A5-A7: Views of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding Timing of feedback on the BS degree. Figures represent percentage of total responses for 1st and 2nd year students and the Group (total number of respondents) as a whole. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Q2	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	4.4	2.7	3.7
A	46.7	18.9	34.1
NAD	33.3	24.3	29.3
D	15.6	35.1	24.4
SD	0.0	18.9	8.5

Table A5

Q3	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	15.6	2.7	9.8
A	40.0	43.2	41.5
NAD	26.7	35.1	30.5
D	15.6	13.5	14.6
SD	2.2	5.4	3.7

Table A6

Q7	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	4.4	5.4	4.9
A	11.1	21.6	15.9
NAD	35.6	24.3	30.5
D	44.4	43.2	43.9
SD	4.4	5.4	4.9

Table A7

Tables A5-A7 Responses of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding aspects of the Timing of feedback on the BS degree. Tables represent percentage of total responses. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Appendix 6.3 – Use of Feedback

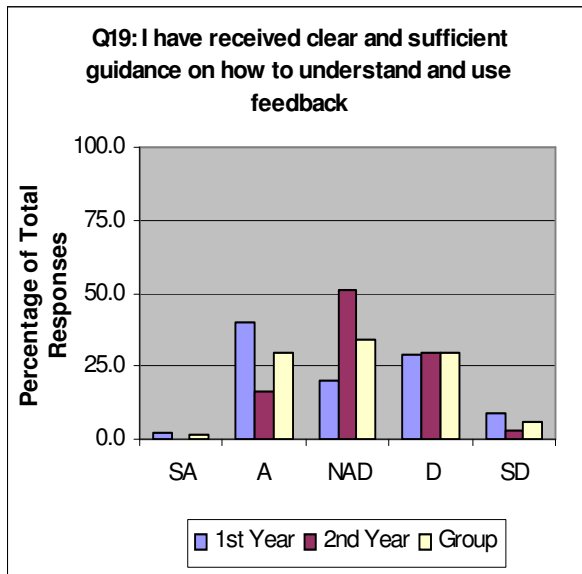


Figure A8

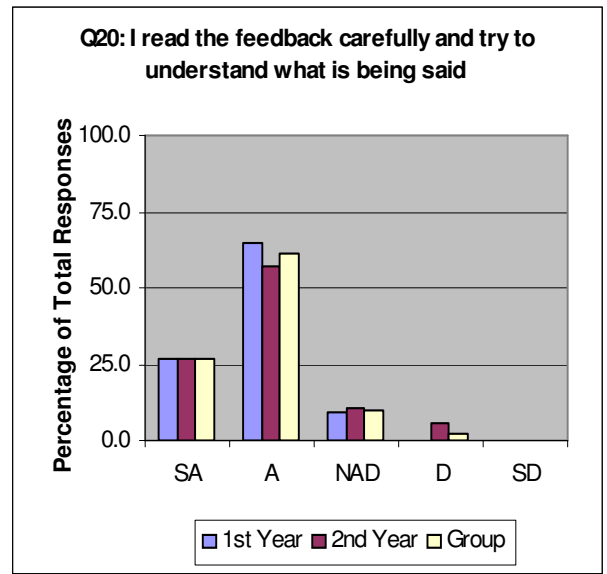


Figure A9

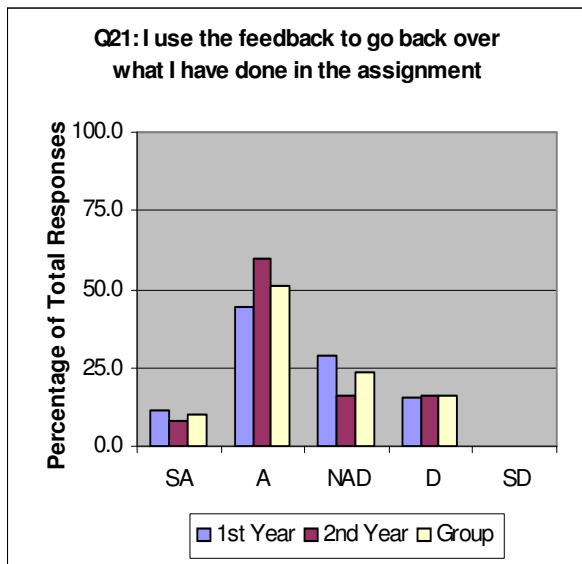


Figure A10

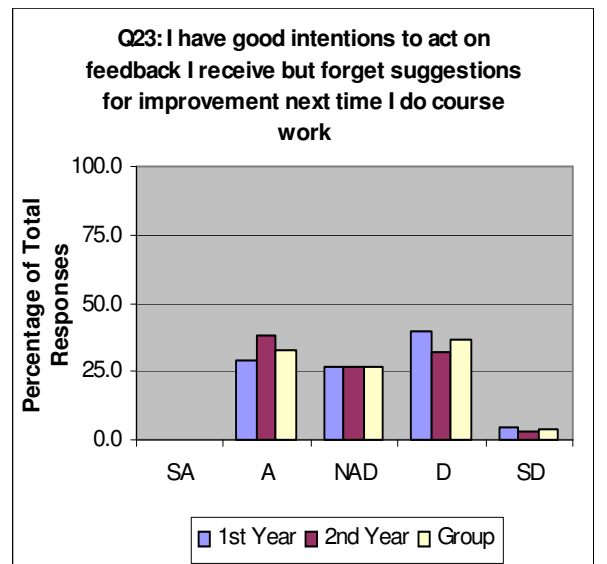


Figure A11

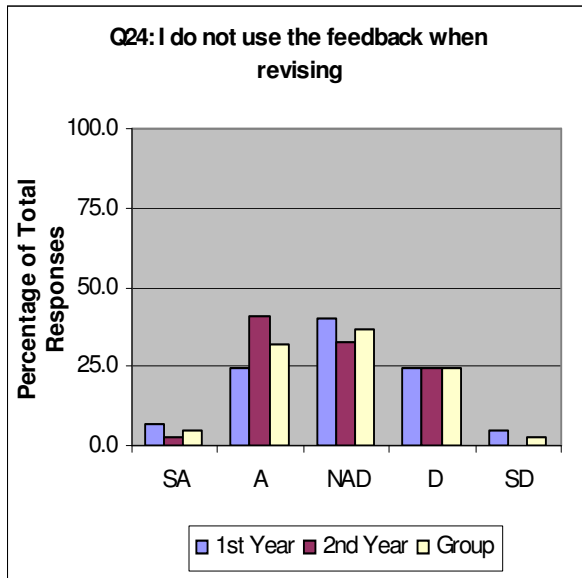


Figure A12

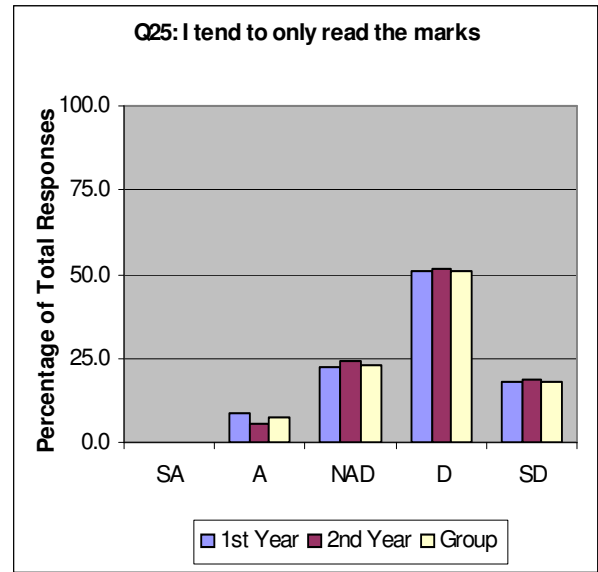


Figure A13

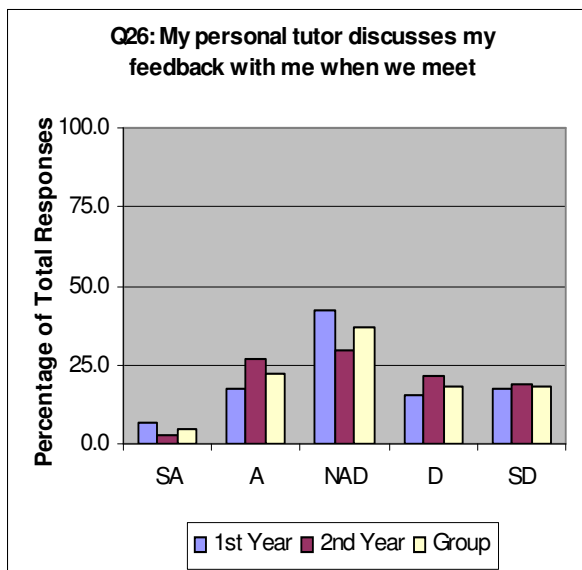


Figure A14

Figures A8-A14: Views of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding Use of feedback on the BS degree. Figures represent percentage of total responses for 1st and 2nd year students and the Group (total number of respondents) as a whole. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Q19	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	2.2	0.0	1.2
A	40.0	16.2	29.3
NAD	20.0	51.4	34.1
D	28.9	29.7	29.3
SD	8.9	2.7	6.1

Table A8

Q20	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	26.7	27.0	26.8
A	64.4	56.8	61.0
NAD	8.9	10.8	9.8
D	0.0	5.4	2.4
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A9

Q21	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	11.1	8.1	9.8
A	44.4	59.5	51.2
NAD	28.9	16.2	23.2
D	15.6	16.2	15.9
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A10

Q23	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	0.0	0.0	0.0
A	28.9	37.8	32.9
NAD	26.7	27.0	26.8
D	40.0	32.4	36.6
SD	4.4	2.7	3.7

Table A11

Q24	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	6.7	2.7	4.9
A	24.4	40.5	31.7
NAD	40.0	32.4	36.6
D	24.4	24.3	24.4
SD	4.4	0.0	2.4

Table A12

Q25	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	0.0	0.0	0.0
A	8.9	5.4	7.3
NAD	22.2	24.3	23.2
D	51.1	51.4	51.2
SD	17.8	18.9	18.3

Table A13

Q26	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	6.7	2.7	4.9
A	17.8	27.0	22.0
NAD	42.2	29.7	36.6
D	15.6	21.6	18.3
SD	17.8	18.9	18.3

Table A14

Tables A8-A14 Responses of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding aspects of the Use of feedback on the BS degree. Tables represent percentage of total responses. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Appendix 6.4 – Quality of Feedback

6.4.1 - Clarity of Feedback

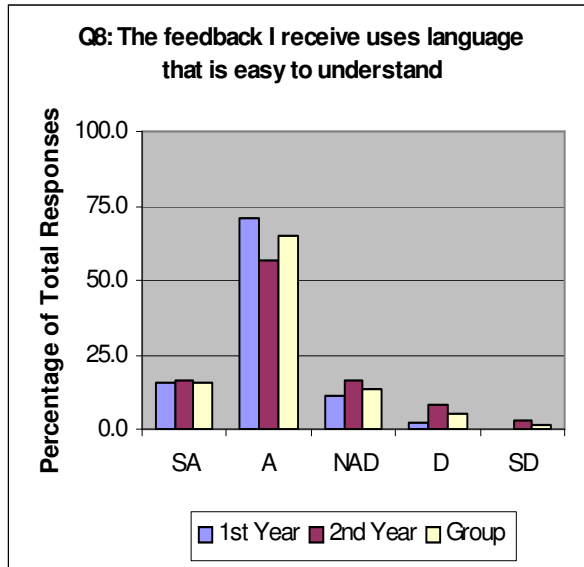


Figure A15

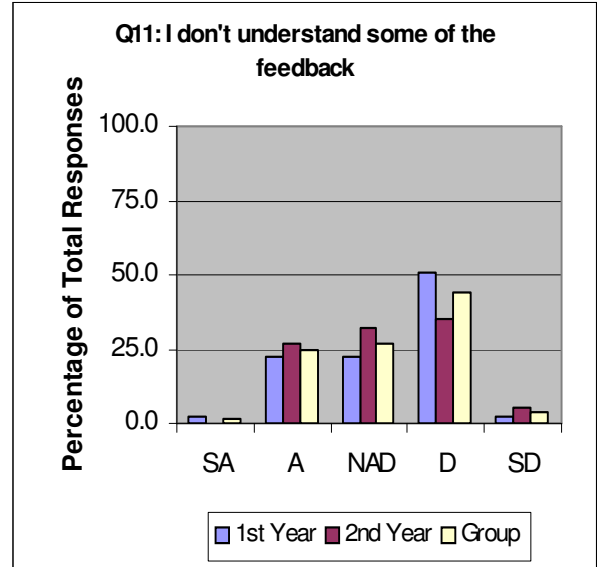


Figure A16

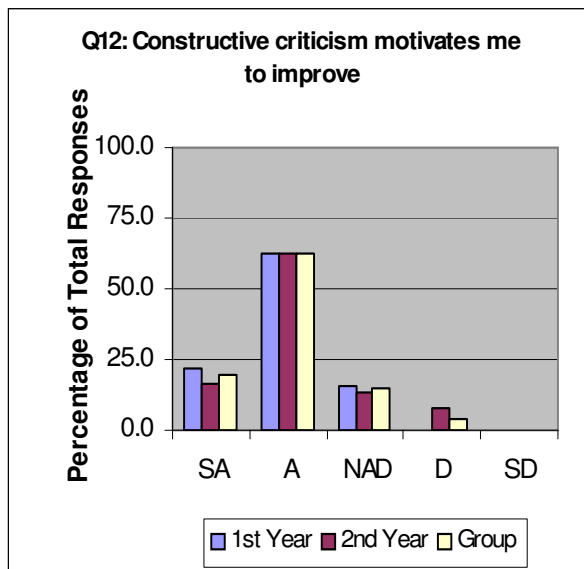


Figure A17

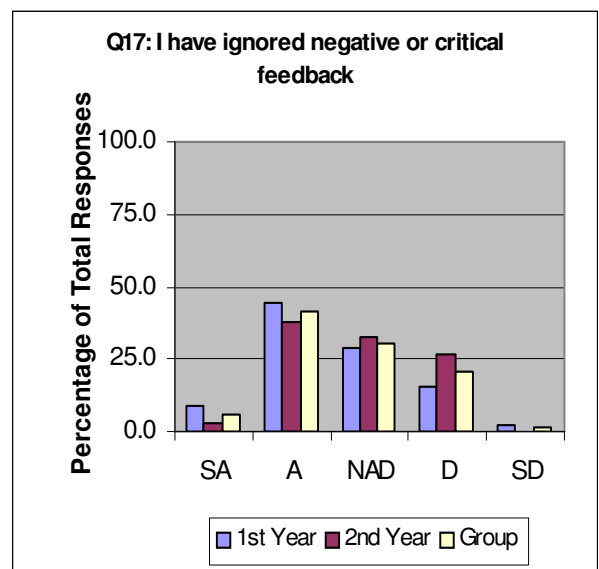


Figure A18

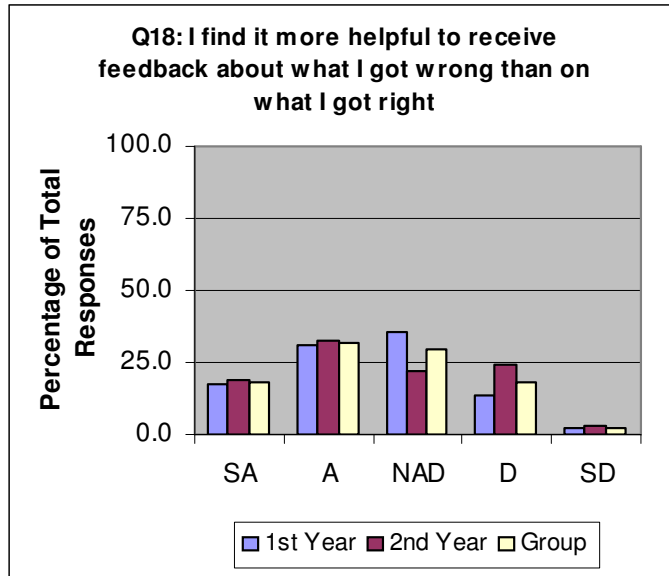


Figure A19

Figures A15-A19: Views of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding Clarity of feedback comments on the BS degree. Figures represent percentage of total responses for 1st and 2nd year students and the Group (total number of respondents) as a whole. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Q8	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	15.6	16.2	15.9
A	71.1	56.8	64.6
NAD	11.1	16.2	13.4
D	2.2	8.1	4.9
SD	0.0	2.7	1.2

Table A15

Q11	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	2.2	0.0	1.2
A	22.2	27.0	24.4
NAD	22.2	32.4	26.8
D	51.1	35.1	43.9
SD	2.2	5.4	3.7

Table A16

Q12	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	22.2	16.2	19.5
A	62.2	62.2	62.2
NAD	15.6	13.5	14.6
D	0.0	8.1	3.7
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A17

Q17	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	0.0	0.0	0.0
A	8.9	8.1	8.5
NAD	24.4	24.3	24.4
D	51.1	51.4	51.2
SD	15.6	16.2	15.9

Table A18

Q18	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	17.8	18.9	18.3
A	31.1	32.4	31.7
NAD	35.6	21.6	29.3
D	13.3	24.3	18.3
SD	2.2	2.7	2.4

Table A19

Tables A15-A19 Responses of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding aspects of the clarity of feedback comments on the BS degree. Tables represent percentage of total responses. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Appendix 6.4.2 – Effectiveness of Feedback Comments

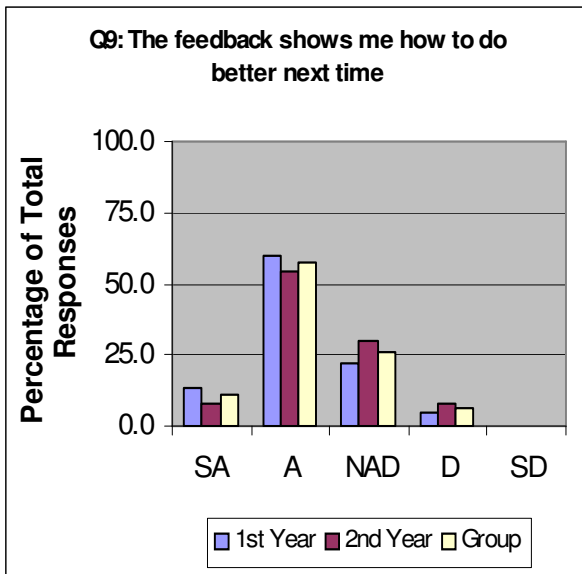


Figure A20

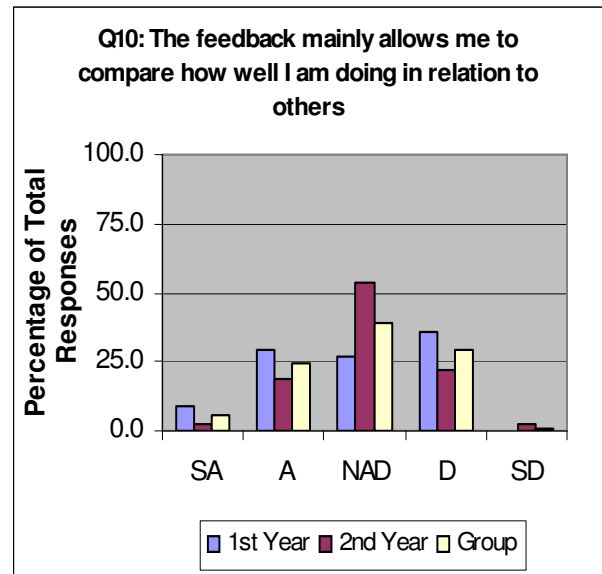


Figure A21

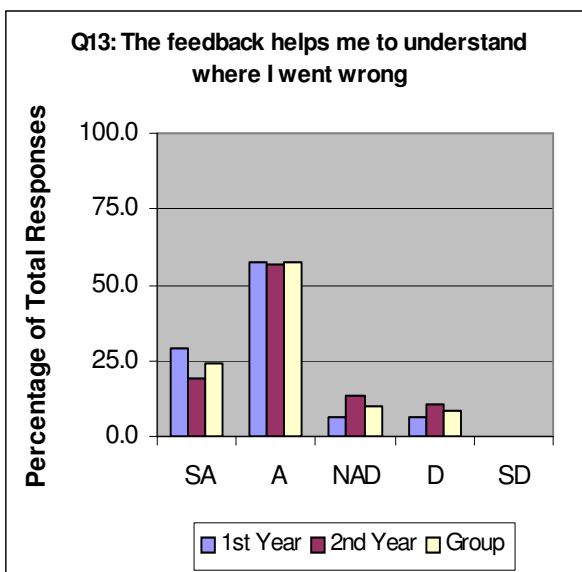


Figure A22

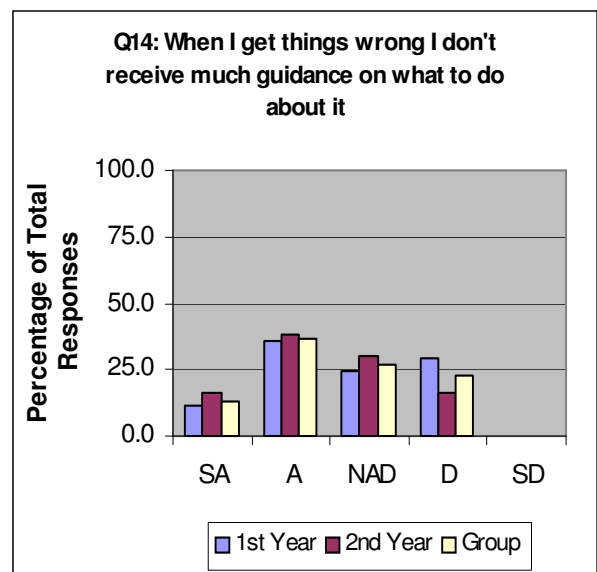


Figure A23

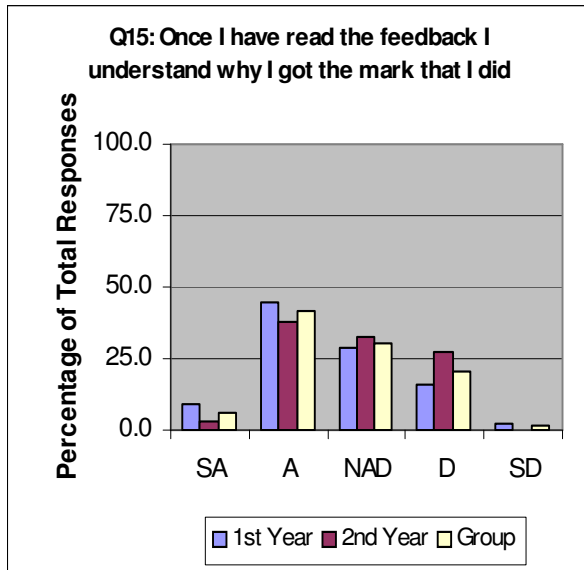


Figure A24

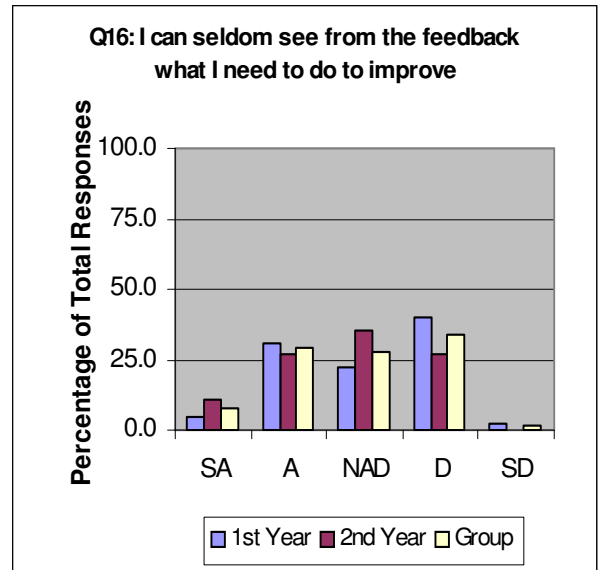


Figure A25

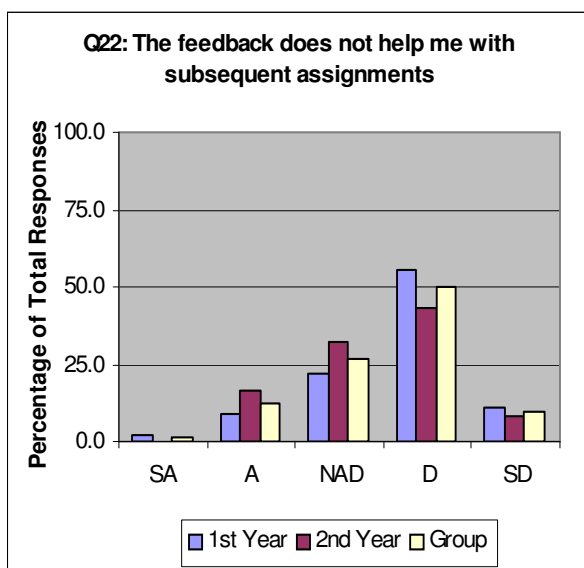


Figure A26

Figures A20-A26: Views of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding effectiveness of feedback comments on the BS degree. Figures represent percentage of total responses for 1st and 2nd year students and the Group (total number of respondents) as a whole. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Q9	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	13.3	8.1	11.0
A	60.0	54.1	57.3
NAD	22.2	29.7	25.6
D	4.4	8.1	6.1
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A20

Q10	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	8.9	2.7	6.1
A	28.9	18.9	24.4
NAD	26.7	54.1	39.0
D	35.6	21.6	29.3
SD	0.0	2.7	1.2

Table A21

Q13	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	28.9	18.9	24.4
A	57.8	56.8	57.3
NAD	6.7	13.5	9.8
D	6.7	10.8	8.5
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A22

Q14	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	11.1	16.2	13.4
A	35.6	37.8	36.6
NAD	24.4	29.7	26.8
D	28.9	16.2	23.2
SD	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table A23

Q15	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	8.9	2.7	6.1
A	44.4	37.8	41.5
NAD	28.9	32.4	30.5
D	15.6	27.0	20.7
SD	2.2	0.0	1.2

Table A24

Q16	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	4.4	10.8	7.3
A	31.1	27.0	29.3
NAD	22.2	35.1	28.0
D	40.0	27.0	34.1
SD	2.2	0.0	1.2

Table A25

Q22	1st Year	2nd Year	Group
SA	2.2	0.0	1.2
A	8.9	16.2	12.2
NAD	22.2	32.4	26.8
D	55.6	43.2	50.0
SD	11.1	8.1	9.8

Table A26

Tables A20-A26: Responses of 1st and 2nd year BS students regarding aspects of the effectiveness of feedback comments on the BS degree. Tables represent percentage of total responses. SA-strongly agree; A-agree; NAD-neither agree nor disagree; D-disagree; SD-strongly disagree.

Appendix 7: Feedback Questionnaire Q27 Responses

7.1 – 1st Year Bs Students

➤ more feedback in general it is really unhelpful to receive a mark with no additional comments

➤ More feedback- particularly for practicals, and ensuring that the feedback is legible when given.

➤ I think it is important feedback shows to students what they have to do for improvement. Not only to outline the strengths and weaknesses of the students

➤ in the feedback. I would like to know the suggestions of improving my writing skills and secondly it would be more good if more information about plagiarism and reference writing would have been better for writing an essay.

➤ I find that sometimes when I email lecturers (I'm talking exclusively about Alan Cann), that their response is often almost completely useless and doesn't often address the question. Apart from this everything is very good and I think the course is very enjoyable. I do think that on returning essays markers could be more clear on what should have been done.

➤ Feedback is usually of a good standard, but could be improved by adding additional notes on the subject matters when mistakes are made in the assignments as this is more helpful when revising. This is more important if the work is returned after the module has ended as it is not possible to contact the demonstrators to ask questions.

➤ The amount of feedback given depends largely on the marker. For instance in some practicals the demonstrator will clearly give guidance as to what I did well and what could be improved but other demonstrators merely give a mark which is useless. Without knowing what I did wrong or right the mark is totally useless.

the same thing applies to the time taken to get feedback. some markers are very slow and another assessment of a similar nature may have been handed in for another module before i get the feedback which means i have made the same mistakes on both when this could have been avoided.

the IT module is especially poor when it comes to getting feedback. we simply don't get any. all we know is which questions were right and which were wrong. we never get any indication of what the right answer was. it would be useful for this module if the correct answers were posted on blackboard following the deadline for that assessment as that would allow people to look at what they did wrong. the option to redo the work (although not submit it obviously) would also be beneficial so people could achieve the correct answer and know how to do it for future reference. general comments on the overall marks is not sufficiently helpful.

➤ model answers to questions that I have got wrong are always useful. Other than that, it's useful to be told about any points that I have missed out on.

➤ More description on both positive and negative points.

➤ Have not actually met with my tutor, as he is away, but am sure we will discuss this when he is back

➤ Don't just say what was wrong and write, give examples of how it can be improved and what was missed out that should have been added. Maybe show an example of a 100% piece of work, to obtain a better understanding of what is being asked to do.

➤ Having more detailed description of what is expected in a piece of work would be of great use. It would be helpful if more detail was given into specific things that were wrong and how it could be improved. More annotations within the work would also be very useful so that remarks made can be directed directly to specific mistakes or strengths.

➤ shows me my mistakes, and helps me improve by giving me advice to be better. i would like the feedback to show me what i did wrong in each module

➤ giving feedbacks while the module is ongoing will give a tip on how one progresses and could be valuable in subsequent assignments but leaving all feedbacks till module is over might not be useful for the particular module itself. though, it will surely be important for other modules.

➤ Written in clearer handwriting or typed.

➤ I received my feedback for my essays and final lab work after I had finished giving the exams for those modules. When I did receive the feedback I didn't give a second glance to it because it didn't matter anymore. Also since each demonstrator expects different things in the lab write up it is at times pointless to look at the previous feedbacks as the demonstrator was a different one. I guess a particular guideline should be set up for it.

➤ On practical write ups we get sometimes feedback. But most of the time it just says "good" and the marks aren't always good at that point of remark. It mostly depends on who your demonstrator is. There is no marking scheme that we can follow as a feedback to where exactly we lost marks. On the exams I am not sure if we will be able to get feedback but that will be very useful. Past papers with answers would do a great deal towards studying and actually being able to answer the questions on the exam paper.

➤ Feedback in general is very important in every aspect of the course especially for first years (me) since we have no clue what exactly is expected of us. It would be useful to go over the first practical write-up questions and the first essay practical write-up.

On essays and presentations a bit more feedback would be useful in future and ofcourse the study and communication skills should be more in contact with the other module lecturers, tutorials, Since we got essays to give in and presentations to do, before we actually got the backup lecture for these.

➤ feedback on work like essays and practical write-ups should have points on what the students have omitted, it should be straight forward and when needed, the right answers should be provided.

➤ It would be useful to arrange a lecture or seminar where people can be taught more on how to write scientific essays or practical write ups. Feedback is good but does not always suggest how to improve.

➤ The feedback i get after my practicals are sometimes doesn't correlate to what you have been told by demonstrater especially in biolgy. Some demonstrater's language doesnt match with what we are suppose to do (report-writting), so if you ou do the way that you have been explained, you end up doing wrong. The explanation should tally the itting.

➤ To have positive and critical points so that i know what i am doing well but what i also need to improve on.

Appendix 7.2 – 2nd Year BS Students

➤ some correct answers to the computer assestments such as the data handling would be great, i get told by the computer what is wrong and the mark i got, but not what the right answer is, isnt too useful as i dont see sometimes where i got it wrong and why, im usually still convinced that the wrong answer i put is right.....

➤ During some of the modules, I got back some of the feedback but there were no many suggestions on how I could improve next time. So it would be useful if the feedback contains on how well we could improve next time, and not only low mark with no common.

➤ For the data handling part of the module, it would have been very useful to be given the correct answers and the reasons for them upon submission of the questions. However, this may not be practical as once the correct answers were known, the entire class would simply be able to copy them. This kind of cooperative answering is still possible under the current system (e.g. "Don't put that answer for that question, I did and it was wrong"), but fortunately we seem too disorganised to really make use of it.

➤ Different people use feedback differently, some give good, useful, understandable comments that can be used whilst others just write 'good work'...not useful! It would be good to get everyone writing some good points-which make you feel better before hearing the bad bits!-then constructive criticism-write what was done wrong and how to correct the problem, it's no good putting that the work is crap, write why. occasionally useful references are given for further reading, this is good!

➤ (1) I feel that feedback is the only way of getting to know where I am wrong and helps me in improving upon it.

(2) Thus, I recommend that feedback should be given in all the assignments including the Final Paper exams (where feedback is not often given).

➤ The use of more than a few words in the comment box would be helpful, and explanations on what was strong and what was weak in the assignment so that it is possible to distinguish what methods of presentation/language used should be used in future courseworks and what should be discouraged. Also, where mistakes have been made, rather than just crossing the work out, the correct answers, or at least prompting to work out the correct answer, could be made. This would eliminate the problem of trying to find someone who got that particular question correct and trying to work out why they received credit.

➤ More information given in the feedback about where marks were lost and why

➤ I think a lot has been done to improve both the quality and consistency of most feedback. And I like the new feedback sheets. The only problems I have had this year is conflicting feedback and marks reflecting this, eg. a poor mark but in positive feedback saying I clearly understood the experiment.... I did go and see the marker which helped clear this up, but more stress perhaps on consistency of remarks, esp positive with the marking.

➤ feedback should be written on the scriptures, rather than on a comments box on the mark sheet. This helps to see where exactly you are going wrong.

➤ Some markers dont give any feedback at all which is not helpfull. Giving general feedback lectures in class aswell as written feedback is often very helpfull.

➤ It would be useful if the first assignment in a series could be returned quickly, in order to improve for the next assignments, as the feedback isn't any use if it cannot be put to use in that module.

➤ Any comments made on how my work compares to the mark scheme, that way it would be possible for me to compare that to my next assignment. It would also help if there were more positive comments, rather than ticks made throughout work, as this way it would help me focus on the same sort of points for the next work. Also a more in depth feedback would be greatly appreciated; however as a student I do understand feedbacks are a compromise between time and number of students.

➤ It would be useful to have feedback from practical reports before the next ones were due in, that way the first marks can be improved upon.

➤ Marks are often a very long time in coming, so long that the module ends before the marks arrive back. This is highly unhelpful.

➤ I would like the feedback to outline more on what i have done best, and the area's I need to improve and how!!!

➤ feedback can include marks such as first, second or third class.

➤ maybe have points on how things could be improved rather than just saying what you've done wrong. Helps give you a starting point to improve.

➤ i do not have any suggestions. i think the feedback i get are helpful enough to guide me into improving myself.

➤ 1) Mention more of the things that went wrong and how to improve them.

2) A little more than a couple of lines giving a vague idea of what went right/wrong with the coursework.

3) Some feedback on the tutorial work and way of improving it before the next tutorial.

➤ we shouldn't only be told where we were mistaken but also how are we going to improve our selves and how we can correct our mistakes

➤ I would like to see how I compared with my peers. And how I compared to the average score.