

# Students' Experiences of Assessment Feedback: Perspectives from a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** This paper presents the findings of a study that explored students' experiences of assessment feedback at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) in South Africa using a phenomenological approach. The qualitative study collected data using a questionnaire that was administered to sample of 200 second and third year students at the Faculty of Management Sciences before purposively selecting ten students from four different departments for in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that written tests were the dominant form of assessment tasks, a mark without comments was the dominant form of feedback; while students appreciated the value of feedback, the quality of the comments, where provided, was poor; and feedback was not promptly given. Given these findings, the paper provides some recommendations to help improve assessment feedback at MUT.

## INTRODUCTION

Studies on assessment feedback in higher education generally focus on the challenges involved in providing assessment feedback that improves student performance (*cf.* Evans 2013). Academics and researchers are thus tasked with devising ways of achieving effective feedback in higher education (Jackson and Marks 2015). Holmes (2015) suggests that carefully designed assessments can promote student engagement and learning. This paper contributes to efforts to achieve effective feedback in higher education by reporting on a study that focussed on students' experiences of assessment feedback at MUT in South Africa using a phenomenological approach. In phenomenological research, researchers listen to the lived experiences of research participants and describe them as accurately as possible without prejudice (Groenewald 2004).

The paper is presented in six sections. Section one briefly reviews the literature on feedback while section two outlines the theoretical framework. Section three discusses the methodology adopted for the study and section four discusses the results. Section five draws conclusions, while section six provides recommendations.

### Aim of the Study

The study aimed to establish whether or not students at the Faculty of Management Scienc-

es at MUT understood and found educational value in the feedback they received. Furthermore, it aimed to determine the extent to which the students responded to and benefitted from assessment feedback. The study employed a phenomenological approach in order to tap students' own experiences in making meaning of the feedback (Waters 2013).

### Literature Review

Feedback is a form of communication, suggesting that it is a two-way process between lecturers and students (Price et al. 2010). Students' input consists of their evaluation of the type of feedback in order to improve their performance and thus contribute to their learning process. Indeed, teaching, learning and assessment are interlinked and should be regarded as simultaneous activities (Beaumont et al. 2011). Assessment feedback should thus not be used to judge students' academic performance without assisting learning (Jackson and Marks 2015).

Providing proper feedback to students is one of the most important interventions in improving the quality of learning (McKenna and Quinn 2012). When students are well-guided and given effective and educationally-sound feedback, they stand a better chance of success (Orsmond and Merry 2011). Given that the higher education sector in South Africa suffers from low throughput rates, the importance of student suc-

cess cannot be overemphasised. It can thus be argued that simply allocating marks does not help students to improve their learning; feedback ought to provide an opportunity to enhance their understanding and performance (Robbinson and Carrington 2004). For example, Jackson and Marks (2015) show that allowing students to write brief reflections on their feedback stimulates effective learning.

Assessment is generally viewed as summative or formative. Summative assessment is conducted at the end of a learning programme, or after completion of a particular module (*cf.* Newhouse 2014). In other words, summative assessment measures the sum of students' performance (Morgan et al. 2004). On the other hand, formative assessment takes place during the process of learning and teaching (van Rooyen and Prinsloo 2003) and provides feedback on students' progress. Pham and Renshaw (2015) posit that, although it is difficult to implement in Asian classrooms, formative assessment is currently the preferred assessment type worldwide. It is preferred because, if implemented effectively, formative assessment can provide immediate educational value to the student (Clynes and Raftery 2008).

Given the preceding discussion, it can be argued that providing feedback demands proper attention from lecturers. For instance, a study on formative feedback conducted by Pereira et al. (2008) at Malaysia Medical University, established that the majority of the students preferred a justification for marks to a mark-only. Similarly, Beaumont et al.'s (2011) study at Edge Hill University in the United Kingdom found that students expressed a strong desire to receive grades/marks alongside comments. This means that lecturers need to devote time to assessment so as to provide useful feedback. While students favour comments in addition to a mark, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) caution that comments should be appropriate and presented in a useful manner in order to improve students' learning. Beaumont et al. (2011) further found that 95 percent of students wanted immediate feedback; as such, timing is crucial to providing meaningful feedback.

### **Paradigm and Theoretical Framework**

The research paradigm positions the fundamental beliefs or the 'world view' adopted by

the researcher in a given research project. Lichman (2013) notes that a paradigm is a way of seeing the world while Babbie and Mouton (2008: 645) refer to it as a "model or framework for observation and understanding, which shapes both what we see and how we understand it". Thus, in a real sense, a paradigm dictates how research is to be conducted. According to Bailey (2007), it is important for researchers to be conscious of the way in which their underlying beliefs (values, assumptions, etc.) influence how they frame their research, how they conduct it and how they interpret the findings. Neuman (2006) contends that researchers' understanding of their world views is vital because it affects their knowledge production. According to Bailey (2007), different world views result in different understandings of ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of the research.

The study was located within the interpretive paradigm, which is based on the belief that people construct reality and that researchers ought to understand the contexts in which reality is constructed (Check and Schutt 2012). In other words, the interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the world through people's meanings of it. Interpretivists argue that reality and knowledge production or meaning making depend on people's interpretation; hence there is no such thing as objective knowledge (Geppert and Clark 2003). They reject the positivist belief that there is a concrete objective reality that can only be captured by scientific methods (Neuman 2006). This understanding is useful to the phenomenological orientation propounded in this paper and discussed in the following section.

This study drew on the phenomenological research orientation, which describes lived experiences of phenomena free from researchers' preconceptions (Waters 2013). The principle of removing researchers' preconceptions, known as bracketing, means that phenomenologists believe that experience is best narrated by the person who experiences it (McLeod 2011). This approach is suitable for research that involves descriptions of contexts as opposed to generalisations (Groenewald 2004) and was thus useful in assessing students' experiences of assessment feedback at MUT. Finlay (1999) contends that the following six principles generally explain all the variants of phenomenology:

- ♦ *The Life World or Lebenswelt*: This explains experience as it is lived in which people as individuals draw meaning. Phenomenological research draws on the everyday experiences of individuals in the world. The study aimed to enter into the world of experience of selected MUT students and understand their experience of assessment feedback as told by them.
- ♦ *Description over Explanation*: Phenomenologists are interested in describing people's experiences. Description is revealed in three ways: respondents' description of the original data, researchers' description of the structures of experiences and the presentation of descriptive findings. In this study, the interview data provided good descriptions of selected MUT students' experiences of assessment feedback.
- ♦ *Phenomenological Reduction*: This explains the idea of bracketing, which offers an opportunity to see the world from another person's point of view without dwelling on assumptions.
- ♦ *Non-judgemental Attitude*: The principle of non-judgement entails accepting and recording what the participants say about their experiences rather than standing in judgement.
- ♦ *Acceptance of a Role for Interpretation*: The historical or socio-cultural factors that influence the interpretation of an experience.
- ♦ *Intentionality*: The principle of intentionality means that the life world exists as it is perceived and experienced. Groenewald (2004) argues that, in order to achieve certainty in phenomenology, only the personal engagement with reality is pertinent. All in all, the phenomenological approach enabled the researchers to engage with students' experiences of assessment feedback without judging them using prior assumptions and/or prejudices.
- ♦ Do MUT students engage with their feedback and draw lessons from it that can be used in new situations?
- ♦ Is assessment feedback provided timeously and in a manner that helps students to learn from it at MUT?

### Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

MUT has three faculties: Management Sciences, Engineering and Natural Sciences. This study was purposively conducted in the Faculty of Management Sciences, which had approximately 4 500 registered students. A sample of 200 second and third year students at the Faculty of Management Sciences was selected to answer the questionnaire. From this sample, ten students were purposively selected for in-depth interviews as follows: four from the Department of Office Technology and two each from the departments of Accounting, Marketing and Public Management. Purposive sampling entails targeting research participants that are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen et al. 2007).

### Data Collection Methods

While the study was framed within a qualitative orientation, data collection commenced with quantitative data. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, which provided descriptive answers to "what?" and "when?" questions. Since these were not in-depth questions, the answers were merely used as pointers to the problem. The questionnaire was administered during the second semester after having been piloted with five students from the Department of Public Administration. The following issues emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires and required probing: *use of assessment feedback, timing of feedback and students' understanding of feedback*.

In-depth interviews were then conducted to engage with "why?" and "how?" questions. These questions were semi-structured, which enabled the researchers to take notes. The interviews were not recorded in order to prevent students from being suspicious and to encourage them to answer the questions freely. The dual use of a questionnaire and interviews enabled the study to benefit from the strengths of both data collection instruments, thereby en-

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Data Methods

The study addressed the following questions:

- ♦ Is there any disjuncture between the feedback provided by lecturers and students' conceptions of such feedback at MUT?

sure that rich data were generated. The timing of data collection was good as by the second semester, students had written sufficient assessments to provide well-informed responses to both the questionnaire and the interviews.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports on the findings that are grouped as follows: forms of assessment tasks, forms of feedback, acting on feedback, and feedback turnaround time.

#### Forms of Assessment Tasks

Students were asked to take two of their subjects and choose the dominant forms of assessment tasks in those subjects. A Likert scale was used, with 1 representing the most commonly used form of assessment and 5 the least used. The first choice subjects were grouped into the category, Subject A, and the second choice into Subject B. Table 1 illustrates the forms of assessment tasks and their frequencies as indicated by the students in relation to these categories.

Table 1 shows that, students indicated that written tests, assignments and examinations are the most common forms of assessment tasks. These findings are in line with Suskie's (2003) contention that written tests are the most common forms of assessment at undergraduate level in higher education. Given that they are time-consuming and may encourage reproduction of recall information if not well framed, the challenge is how written tests are assessed at MUT. It was thus important to establish forms of assessment feedback on the tasks that were used.

#### Forms of Assessment Feedback on Tests/Assignments/Examinations

Students were asked to identify the forms of feedback they normally receive in the two subjects of their choice, Subject A and Subject B as shown in Table 1.

As shown in Table 2, for Subject A, a mark-only form of feedback accounted for 75 percent, while a mark plus a written comment accounted for 12 percent. Communicating or orally providing the correct answer to the whole class ac-

**Table 1: Frequencies of assessment tasks as indicated by MUT students**

<i>Forms of assessment task</i>	<i>Frequencies of assessment tasks for subjects chosen by students as first choice on likert scale from most commonly used to least used - Subject A</i>	<i>Frequencies of assessment tasks for subjects chosen by students as second choice on likert scale from most commonly used to least used - Subject B</i>
<i>Written Tests, Examinations</i>	1. 179 2. 10 3. 6 4. 2 5. 3	1. 178 2. 10 3. 6 4. 3 5. 3
<i>Written Assignments</i>	1. 127 2. 34 3. 15 4. 10 5. 14	1. 120 2. 38 3. 19 4. 5 5. 18
<i>Assignment Presentations</i>	1. 96 2. 37 3. 23 4. 11 5. 30	1. 99 2. 37 3. 20 4. 12 5. 32
<i>Oral Assessment</i>	1. 20 2. 05 3. 05 4. 19 5. 151	1. 21 2. 09 3. 00 4. 19 5. 151
<i>Demonstrations</i>	1. 08 2. 02 3. 05 4. 01 5. 184	1. 06 2. 06 3. 01 4. 01 5. 186

**Table 2: Forms of assessment feedback on tasks**

Form of feedback	Subject A		Subject B	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
A mark only on the answer sheet or after each oral exercise	149	75	153	77
A mark plus a written comment by the lecturer	24	12	15	7
The lecturer gives the correct answers to the whole class	21	10	26	13
The lecturer discusses performance in the assessment with each individual student	06	3	06	3
Total	200	100	200	100

counted for 10 percent and giving feedback in discussions with individual students only accounted for 3 percent. A similar pattern is reflected for Subject B.

For written tests, a mark-only is disadvantageous as students do not learn how to improve on the task. As noted earlier, comments assist students to reflect on feedback (Jackson and Marks 2015). Most of the students were not in favour of a mark-only and preferred a mark accompanied by comments as well as individual discussion of performance. However, these accounted for only for 12 percent and 3 percent, respectively in terms of Subject A. Carefully designed assessments contribute to student engagement and learning (Holmes 2015); as such, these findings suggest that the majority of students are not given the opportunity to act on feedback and to learn from assessments.

### Acting on Feedback

The findings show that students at MUT appreciate the value of feedback in their learning. However, as argued by Meyer (2009), students in South Africa are generally not satisfied with the quality of the feedback they receive or the way in which it is given. Students reported the following:

- A *I use feedback to correct my mistakes in the test, so that I do not repeat the same mistakes...*
- B *I use feedback to prepare for the next test and more importantly for the purposes of developing my own knowledge which I can use in future...*
- C *Feedback helps me to assess myself and my performance. I normally check what I had written in the test, check what feedback says and compare what was written in my notes and this helps me to see if*

*perhaps I did not read instructions properly and I correct that next time.*

- D *Feedback helps me to see my mistakes if the lecturer shows me, what I was supposed to do or what I was supposed to have done so that I will not repeat the same mistakes...*

As noted earlier, the major challenge identified is that, in general, students received feedback in the form of a mark-only. However, where comments were made, students questioned the quality and usefulness of such comments. Students reported the following regarding lecturers' comments:

- A *Some lecturers use cruel words when they write on our test papers. They write things that do not go down well with us. We do not like that because we are students and we are here to learn...*
- B *Like a lecturer who says what I have written does not make sense, which discourages me...*
- C *Sometimes the way feedback is written may be embarrassing... Words like "you will not make it if you do not study" are discouraging because sometimes you have studied hard and the lecturer thinks you did not study because you have done badly...*
- D *Sometimes the handwriting of the lecturer is not clear and you can't see what the lecturer wanted to say...*

These findings are in line with the findings of other researchers in South Africa (cf. Lockett and Sutherland 2000; Vooght 2006; Singh 2008; Meyer 2009). Furthermore, Singh's (2008) study on *Hospitality management students' understanding of and response to assignment feedback at a university of technology in South Africa*, found that students were ill-equipped to

deal optimally with qualitative feedback. This means that even when useful comments are made, students do not automatically make sense of them. One way to encourage effective feedback is by asking students to write brief reflections on the feedback they receive (Jackson and Marks 2015). This offers an opportunity to understand the assessment feedback and use it to improve their performance.

### Feedback Turnaround Time

In general, the respondents indicated that they preferred to receive feedback within a week to two weeks after assessment. However, in some instances feedback was received four weeks after assessment or, worse still, just before the next assessment. Some students expressed their frustration with this situation:

- A *Sometimes we get feedback when we are about to write an examination and that is when some lecturers start giving us information about our test. If I were to receive such information on time I would do better in the examination.*
- B *Sometimes we even get feedback and our marks when we knock at their (lecturers') doors... In some cases we even write examination without getting our test scripts...*
- C *I prefer to receive feedback within two weeks because once the feedback is late you get lazy to check your mistakes and you do not give it much attention and you start losing interest in it.*
- D *... I prefer to receive feedback within two weeks. If it is late it should not be more than three weeks. As a student you have other work to focus on; you can't be waiting for feedback for very long.*

Providing feedback late is not useful as formative feedback ought to immediately contribute to effective learning (Lyon and Wylie 2015). For example, Beaumont et al. (2011) found that 95 percent of students wanted immediate feedback.

Given the results, this paper posits that, at the Faculty of Management Sciences at MUT, there is a disjuncture between the feedback provided by lecturers and students' conceptions of such feedback; that students do not benefit fully from the feedback as it is mostly a mark-only; and that feedback is rarely provided on time in order to be useful to students.

### CONCLUSION

This paper reported on the findings of a study that explored students' experiences of assessment feedback within the Faculty of Management Sciences at MUT in South Africa using a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach meant that the study was interested in assessment feedback as experienced by students themselves. Four major findings emerged: (1) that written tests were the dominant form of assessment; (2) that a mark-only without comments was the dominant form of feedback; (3) that while students appreciated the value of feedback the quality of the comments, where given, were poor; and (4) that feedback was not promptly given to students. Recommendations are provided to help improve assessment feedback within the Faculty of Management Sciences at MUT.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the challenges associated with assessment feedback at the Faculty of Management Sciences at MUT, it is recommended that lecturers should provide more feedback than a mark-only; for example, by identifying common mistakes and providing group feedback on these aspects. Lecturers could also dedicate certain times to provide individual feedback to students since a dedicated feedback period is as important as teaching time. It is further recommended that lecturers should devise ways of following up on feedback in order to determine whether or not students actually understood and/or used it.

Lecturers should consider alternate modes of assessment such as article reviews, projects, portfolios, case studies and role-plays, particularly for third year students. This would lay the foundation for postgraduate studies, which is one of MUT's strategic priorities. Furthermore, they could use oral assessment such as presentations as a compulsory component of all modules or subjects at every level in order to enhance students' communication skills, which are currently a major challenge across the institution. More pertinent perhaps, in order to contribute to effective feedback, they should avoid negative comments so as to encourage and support the learning process.

Lecturers should also consider adopting alternative and more creative ways of giving feedback such as peer assessment, self-assessment, on-line assessment and others. This may require

training for some staff members, which could be done by staff at the newly established Teaching and Learning Development Centre (TLDC) at MUT. MUT needs to introduce a policy that stipulates the time required for feedback for specific forms of assessment. To implement the policy successfully, the university needs to strengthen the use of tutors in providing tutorials and marking some of the students' work.

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