

[P16] Feedback (feedforward) on exams: are specimen answers from previous cohorts useful?

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Introduction

Feedback to students is important to us as it is on the quality enhancement agenda (QAA, 2007) and its quality is generally rated relatively poorly by our students (McCune and Hounsell, 2005). There is little time in a crowded curriculum to give exams formatively, and giving feedback to students on exams poses logistical problems for us and may come too late for students sitting hour-long essay-type questions for the first time.

The Exercise

This exercise involved two cohorts of students in Hong Kong studying a distance learning programme. The students were direct entrants into the programme at degree stage (Level 9 in the Scottish system), having had little previous experience of the hour-long essay-type questions to be used in their exam. They had previously studied one module in this programme, for which there was no opportunity to give feedback on their exam. In the exercise students were given formative 'feedforward' by provision of specimen exam answers from previous cohorts via WebCT.

After studying a given topic, students were presented with the exam question on the topic from a previous exam, the solution to the question prepared for the External Examiner, and a range of students' answers (excellent to poor) to that question. Students were invited to rank these answers and award a mark to each. Subsequently for each answer I provided the mark awarded to the answer, and a detailed commentary on it with reference to the solution (commenting on both the positive and the negative aspects of the answer, and accuracy, scope and presentation style).

Students' evaluation of the exercise

Feedback from students was obtained using an online questionnaire, answered after the exam but before results were known to the students. The return rate was ca. 25%, representing 22 students.

All responding students considered that the exercise was worthwhile, helped them judge the quality of their own answers in the exam, helped them improve their performance in the exam, made them more confident in taking the exam, showed them how to avoid making mistakes when answering questions, helped them work out what they needed to do to produce a good answer, and helped them learn about the topics. All respondents agreed that the exercise should be repeated with subsequent cohorts. The majority (>70%) of respondents considered that the exercise did not take up too much of their time,

and that it helped them with revision. 41% of respondents considered that the exercise was as useful as being given feedback on their previous exam would have been, but 45% were undecided about this.

Students' performance in the exercise

Compared to previous cohorts there was no obvious difference in mean mark in the exam or the range of marks, allaying concerns that the exercise might lead to mark inflation or restriction in the range of marks. In all cases pass rates exceeded 97%.

There was no correlation between the mean mark achieved by a student and the number of hits on the relevant WebCT pages (correlation coefficient = 0.249). However, the number of hits on the pages does not necessarily bear any relationship to the time a student spent interacting with the corresponding material. It might be of significance that the one student in the cohorts studied here who failed the exam was one of a small set of students (ca. 7% of the total) who failed to open the relevant WebCT pages.

Conclusions

The exercise was judged to be useful for at least a significant proportion of students, and the decision was taken to continue the exercise with future cohorts. The exercise should prove useful to any student entering our programmes without a background in answering the conventional exam questions we use (not only direct entrants at later stages of our programmes but also school leavers entering our programmes at Level 7). Our School is currently considering franchise agreements with universities in and elsewhere, and the exercise seems ideally suited to assist not only the students studying our programmes abroad but also the staff involved in delivering these programmes in judging the quality standards of our exams.

A study by Huxham (2007) showed students preferred personal feedback on exams over model feedback. However, students performed significantly better in exams when exposed to model answers. This suggested that the best approach might be a hybrid one, drawing on the strengths of both kinds of feedback. With the students involved in this study personal feedback on exams was judged not to be practical, and students' perceptions and the study by Huxham (2007) support the use of model answers with these students.

References

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