

LX.
lab

Feedback

Cultural Change

Report

2021



Executive summary

This report captures the LX.Lab's efforts to understand the nature of user interactions with learner feedback, and the levers or potential avenues that may be available (to central learning and teaching support areas, and generally) to encourage changes in practice. These efforts were undertaken to respond to the Enhancing Learner Feedback initiative outlined in the 2021 UTS Corporate Plan. The findings draw on experiences and viewpoints captured from four key user groups at UTS: Casual Teaching Staff, Students, Subject Coordinators and Learning and Teaching Staff.

Main themes of findings:

- Teaching staff often think of 'feedback' first or primarily as the response to a student's assignment submission. When students are asked about feedback, they much more readily refer to things outside of this. This shows a potential **misalignment in values around feedback between staff, university and students.**
- While at an institutional level there is a clear interest in improving feedback practice as part of enhancing teaching quality, the **priority or immediate relevance is less clear** for the members of the four key user groups, who are the individuals ultimately responsible for actioning change.
- **Feedback often lacks visibility**, due to its natural characteristics of being private and embedded at a granular level of teaching. This is compounded by the general lack of 'feedback on feedback'. It is therefore difficult for actors to see that practice needs changing, and where it should be changed.
- There are a number of **potential levers which target users** from these different groups according to their needs or values. This report presents recommendations for further consideration by leadership, central and faculty learning and teaching support areas, in order to provide coordinated support and capacity to address these areas to produce the desired shifts in behaviour.

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Context

Learner feedback - the feedback that students receive as part of their learning experience - has been an area of concern for some time, as UTS students often give it low ratings within Student Feedback Surveys (SFS). In the shift toward more online learning (both generally, and as a response to COVID pressures) this area has become increasingly critical to address. Learning.futures2 highlights the need to attend to feedback by embedding it as a key element of the framework.

In order to respond to these needs, this project focused on the experiences of four different key user groups at UTS to gain a closer understanding of how they relate to feedback, and what possible levers or opportunities might exist to assist them to change their interaction with, or practice around, feedback.

Ultimately, this investigation was aimed at determining what artefacts or experiences would be the most effective in promoting change, and what could be built into the process of supporting the faculties with implementing Learning.futures2.

Insight themes

By collecting the viewpoints together from the four different user groups, key themes emerge which encapsulate the feedback problem.

NB: The more granular user findings and insights from which these themes have been derived can be found below in *Appendix B: User Type Findings Summary*.

Priority and Relevance

While at an institutional level there is a clear interest in improving feedback practice as part of enhancing teaching quality collectively, the priority or immediate relevance is less clear for the user groups who would need to embody the change.

- **Students** are more focused on discipline subject matter and less on 'life long learning skills', if not directly tied to the former. Additionally, general resources around such topics that are not tied specifically to faculty or discipline do not tend to get as much traction, as they step outside students' sphere of relevance.
- **Casual Staff** priorities revolve around getting the required work done in balance with the monetary compensation and their own values or interest in teaching. Consequently, investing in a particular element of teaching practice may not be a particularly high priority.
- **Subject Coordinators** have a range of priorities and depending on immediate needs and their values around teaching. The priority of improving teaching practice (and specifically feedback practice) is dependent on their current scenario.
- **Learning and Teaching support and development staff** often prioritise their work according to the strategic needs passed down to them and have minimal capacity to chase issues outside of this scope.

Making connections to a problem, need or value that the individual user groups have could boost traction and intrinsic motivation, particularly if it is clear how certain actions will result in positive change. This is dependent on there being a forum where this argument can be communicated to the user groups in question. These efforts also need to be different for the individual user types, and even within these different user types. For instance, efforts to engage students would need to be at the Faculty or School level for them to perceive an initiative as relevant.

Visibility and Access

The inherent nature of learner feedback is that:

- It is typically a communication contained between two people (the giver and the receiver), and thus not readily available to be observed outside of this interaction.
- This interaction often takes place at a very granular level of instruction, and is intertwined with teaching throughout a course as a whole.

Consequently, the need to refine feedback practice is a largely silent problem. There is little visibility of where issues are, or where improvements might be made - there is little to no 'feedback on feedback'. Unlike other teaching issues, where there is capacity to see student discomfort and make alterations, feedback is not a problem that teaching teams are able to notice as an issue 'in passing' and make a note to fix.

This visibility issue is also true from the perspective of learning and teaching support and development staff, who do not have the access and view to meaningfully assist with refining this practice due to its granular and holistic nature.

Knowledge and Training

A lack of access to training around dealing with feedback is also common. In many cases feedback practice is learnt 'on the job' and/or modelled on previous experiences as the receiver of feedback. Such avenues do not ensure the integration of up to date or effective practice.

- For **sessional staff**, access to any training is difficult due to a lack of defined, paid professional development time as part of their role.
- For **students**, feedback literacy or agency is a topic that is not generally addressed.
- **Learning and teaching support staff** are not always pedagogically equipped as it may not be seen as relevant to the particular orientation of their role.
- **Subject Coordinators** are unlikely to have gone through specific training around feedback practice, so are potentially embodying practices based on their own experiences of learning 'on the job' in their early career.

Affect

The affective layer tied to giving and receiving feedback (and the general low level of awareness of the impact of affect by the participants within the exchange) makes it a markedly more complicated issue to solve.

- Receiving feedback as a student is an experience that is often emotionally weighted due to their investment in, and attachment to, their work. Depending on their learner identity and self perception, students can find it particularly hard to internalise that feedback comments are tied to an artefact they have created at a particular moment in their education. Instead students may perceive feedback to be about them as a person and their inherent capacity to learn a particular skill, thus leading to heightened sensitivity.
- Similarly, the experience of creating feedback has an emotional component for teaching staff, as they attempt to provide corrective comments in a way that is inspiring rather than deflating. This is coupled with the personal uncertainty and second guessing that is often tied to the process of assessing student work. These elements add a large amount of mental load and discomfort to the experience.

Because feedback is fundamentally to do with managing relationships, the process of change or suggesting new solutions is slower as the impacts need to be more carefully weighed by the participants.

Recommendations (Levers) and Outcomes to date

The following highlights the recommended levers that could be used to target further practice change in the 'feedback problem' space and highlights where artefacts have already been created as part of the Q1-Q2 2021 feedback project work to respond to these key areas.

A key idea that sits behind several of these levers is the concept of the **Feedback Ecosystem**. Rather than perceiving feedback as being tied purely to the assessment moment (as the paragraph of text returned with a marked assignment), instead, conceiving of feedback as an interconnected series of touchpoints throughout a subject provides more space where changes can be enacted. This rhetoric supports the creation of a feedback rich environment aided by the use of different practices and tools (Automated-feedback, peer feedback, collective feedback, etc) wherein students are in contact with more and varied feedback touchpoints and thus have more points available to triangulate their understanding. Finally, the ecosystem ideal provides a platform for the discussion of iterative loops, with small alterations and additions with evaluation and subsequent change. This avoids a fundamental overhaul mentality that might be a barrier to staff engagement.

Recommendations (Levers)	Existing outcomes (Q1/Q2, 2021)
<p>Promote the language of the ‘Feedback Ecosystem’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To allow teaching staff to see how different tools or approaches can be used to evolve their use of feedback holistically 	<p>Embedded in created materials (resources/workshops/discussions), i.e., Enriching your feedback ecosystem with Automated Feedback (Presentation), Save Time and Create Connection: Give Audio Feedback a Try (Presentation)</p>
<p>Consider further ways to make feedback ecosystem changes relevant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate ways to tie feedback improvement to teaching staff priorities Explore ways that processes can be templated to take off as much load as possible 	<p>This has been addressed by creating an ‘Assistance program’ package structure for working with teaching staff. Assistance program packages involve aiding staff in implementing the resource as part of their subject (to reduce load) and include evaluation to allow staff to use as evidence of improvement of teaching practice. eg, Sessional Staff Feedback Resource - Assistance Program</p>
<p>Find ways to enable and encourage ‘feedback on feedback’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find and encourage use of technology solutions that allow teaching staff to collect useful information about their feedback that they can then use to see where adjustments are needed to refine their own practice. Suggest other practices that teaching staff can use to collect student viewpoints 	<p>The SFS interpretation resource provides a range of suggestions for encouraging feedback from students and suggests a number of methods for gathering student viewpoints.</p>
<p>Ways to create value for formative/‘informal’(non-assessment response) feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In order to validate and allow energy to be invested in this space by teaching staff (using tools like automated feedback technologies, etc) 	<p>The focus on Feedback Ecosystem helps to show that this is an area that attention can be validly given, but more needs to be done to make it possible to invest.</p> <p>The work done around automated feedback has started to suggest how the university can support a range of metrics that would invest endpoint value in different behaviours.</p> <p>The ‘Assistance program’ package structure also aims to tie value by setting up its own evaluation frame, which can then be tied to other KPI reporting.</p>

Recommendations (Levers)	Existing outcomes (Q1/Q2, 2021)
<p>Focus on student feedback literacy/ agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● giving students the opportunity to learn the required skills to unpack and make actionable plans from given feedback ● provided through direct resources that are relevant to students (framed within their own faculty/discipline) or by assisting teaching staff to embed in their courses 	<p>The ‘Festival of Feedback’ outreach week (31st Aug - 2nd Sept) aimed to create awareness around feedback literacy and provide advice in this space.</p> <p>More work that can be done in this space around embedding feedback literacy materials in courses (potentially through an assistance package).</p>
<p>Support sessional staff in feedback practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● communicate advice to deal with affect and process 	<p>A resource collection and assistance program package has been created to address this.</p>
<p>Pursue and promote Audio/Video feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● as a means to remove some of the mental/emotional load around assessment tied feedback practice. 	<p>Resources (Article, Infographic,) and a workshop have been created to communicate the benefits and process behind this.</p>
<p>Pursuing policy change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to further embed standards around feedback practice into existing requirements. 	<p>This was beyond the scope of the current project, but merits further investigation as a different path to potential change in practice.</p>

Conclusion: Moving forward with a focus on faculty specificity

Moving forward beyond the specific outcomes attained through this project work, and looking towards the further activation of the identified levers, one factor that warrants greater investment for future efforts is more granular faculty or discipline specific approaches.

As noted above, in the case of students, the interaction with resources decreases once materials are positioned more generally than their own faculty/discipline. This seems to mark the edge of the zone of relevance for students, and so creating specific materials with targeted communication will prove more effective in embedding these skills.

Similarly, the way that feedback is performed differs by faculty/discipline in meaningful ways and consequently this degree of granularity is important to consider and respond to when working with teaching staff around refining their practices.

While the centralised focus towards improving feedback practice within the scope of the project undertaken has undoubtedly led to benefits, in future investment, drilling down to attend to specific faculty needs and requirements will lead to a 'stickier' and more ingrained result with resounding flow on effects.

Appendix A: Process Breakdown

LX.lab Project Team

Name	Area/s of focus
Marty van de Weyer	Course Coordinators, LX and L+T Staff
Alex White	Sessional Staff
Aivan Nguyen	Students
Phil Mills	Course Coordinators
David Yeats	LX and L+T Staff
Michael Chan	Students
Lissy Hartmann	Sessional Staff

Research Aims

To understand key user groups' perceptions, behaviours, and needs around feedback, including:

- What they currently think about feedback
- What their common behaviours are around feedback
- What their needs are around feedback
- What their needs are around receiving new information
- What blockers are in place preventing them from changing their thoughts and/or practices around feedback.

Research method summary

In order to undertake the research of these different user groups, the project team was broken up into pairs, with each pair taking up the focus of a particular user group. The pairs were then provided with research aims as a focal point for their investigation.

While the individual pairs were not dictated a defined approach, each group determined the most effective method to reach the research goals was to undertake a number of interviews with representatives of within their user group. Due to the different access to members of these user groups, the manner in which these interviews were undertaken differed per group.

Appendix B: User Type Findings and Insights

Course Coordinators

Key User findings

- Subject Coordinators staff see blockers to change in feedback practice like:
 - 'Time, training, opportunity to talk about it with colleagues, and with experts from like IML or LX lab? [And feedback on our own feedback] Yeah, how can we improve if I don't know if I'm doing it wrong'
 - Funding is also seen as a key issue by some - Paraphrasing 'If you want to have more feedback who is paying for that?'
 - Important to note that the current COVID cutbacks/shifts loom large in some areas creating change fatigue, resistance to taking on any new initiatives.
- Teaching staff spoken to have an appreciation for the importance of feedback, but it is still often perceived through the lens of assessment
- Potentially not aware of all the points that they actually provide feedback due to the focus on 'feedback' as single 1-to-1 moment (typically around assessment)
- Still unclear whether placement of feedback/feedforward is generally thought about as a key part of course design.
- Awareness of peer approaches appears to be a big motivator around changes in practice
- In terms of making changes to course designs, the common practice seems to be to make changes while running the class (immediately after having seen how it worked in practice, take notes or make changes directly for the next time around)
- The degree to which feedback is discussed with sessional staff varies, but still seems to be fairly limited.
- The general perception of automated feedback is that is 'it's not relevant to what I do/I can't see how you can assess what we do with an automated tool', illustrating the inbuilt assumption that auto feedback is a replacement for assessment feedback (rather than its actual functions)

Insights

- Subject Coordinators seem to be the nexus of potential change (due to their capacity to shape course design and manage how teaching practice occurs through the teaching team), but they also have perhaps the least capacity to make it a priority (in particular at the current time)
- While there is a clear interest in improving feedback practice from a university level (improve teaching collectively/moving an average to be able to report on teaching quality), this emphasis is not as clear for individual subject coordinators. Improving their teaching practice may or may not be a priority based on their current performance/other priorities. For teaching staff, due to prioritisation pressures it comes down to "Does it fix a problem I currently have?" or "Does it allow me to embody my values?".

- The visibility of the impact of their own feedback seems to be one of the key breakdowns here (all the evidence for its effectiveness seems a bit anecdotal). Creating a systemised way of receiving 'feedback on feedback' (simple survey or other type mechanism), may allow for some more natural/self motivated practice change.

Sessional staff

Key User findings

- All interviewees did not identify feedback occurring outside of formal assessments without prompting
- Interviewees identified various structural issues outside of their control impacting upon the provision and quality of feedback; including subject design, assessment design and rubric design
- Interviewees understand the need for feedback to be usable in the next assessment (feedback loops)
- A variety of approaches are taken to provide feedback to students outside of assessments
- Student attitudes and understanding of feedback is seen as an issue
- More acceptance of audio feedback than video based feedback
- Not enough time given to mark assessments (significant amount of unpaid hours)

Insights

- Student feedback literacy is interconnected to tutor feedback literacy - improvements to each benefit the other
- Any improvements to feedback quantity need to occur outside of assessment marking processes or involve efficiency improvements to the assessment marking process
- Opportunity for feedback literacy improvements would include recognition of peer to peer feedback and other approaches outside of feedback within assessments
- Tutors have a wealth of ideas and approaches relating to framing and delivering feedback for students so that they are encouraged to engage. Potential to facilitate
- Loss of experience through staff turn around and insufficient time for marking are both widely reported
- Consider a focus upon audio rather than video for feedback as audio feedback is considered less daunting to adopt

Students

Key User findings

- There is a perception that constructive feedback is not always provided in subjects, with the statement 'I received constructive feedback throughout this subject' performing relatively poorly in the SFS from 2015-20
- The purpose of feedback is often perceived by students as mark justification (to explain the difference between the student's anticipated grade and the one that they have received)
- Timing of feedback plays a critical role in determining whether a student will action the feedback, rather than the delivery of it
- Content that is tied to their faculty/discipline will receive attention. Outside of this frame it is not perceived as 'for them'/personally relevant. This perhaps ties into the identity forming nature of university studies - creating a personal connection to an industry/professional area.
- Previous experience of feedback impacts a student's ability to utilise feedback and existing biases prevail even if feedback is improved
- There is an overall lack of consistent and centralised messaging about feedback to students
- There is an overall lack of resources for students about feedback literacy
- There is a perception from student support staff that 'feedback literacy' is not a topic that engages many students, as they typically seek support for things that present an immediate need rather than a generic skill.
 - HELPS: "[Students are] less keen on workshops that build generic skills but aren't clearly related to an immediate perceived need."
 - Student learning hub: Students are more interested in podcast episodes about 'how to study' rather than feedback episodes. "If we're able to frame feedback literacies as actionable study skills, I think we can get more buy-in from students."
- Student perceptions of feedback differ dramatically between faculties
- Students may engage more with feedback literacy concepts if they are framed around assessment literacy/capabilities
- Multiple platforms for feedback creates disruption and therefore missed feedback or confusion for students.
- Student desire:
 - To receive feedback that is
 - Clear and constructive
 - Provided in a timely fashion, with opportunities to action the feedback within a closed loop
 - Personalised
 - To feel supported in receiving negative feedback
 - To be enabled in:
 - Actioning feedback (ideally through design of connected learning activities/assessments)
 - Providing feedback on feedback

Insights

- To solve the ‘feedback problem’, it is critical that there is a focus on improving student feedback literacy, rather than framing the problem as merely a teaching problem.
- Potential mitigation strategies: short-term: incorporate feedback resources as part of subject materials e.g. through a module template; long-term: ‘re-branding’ feedback as something that is critical to careers
- Breakdown per faculty is required for any materials/ focus to be seen as relevant by students

Learning and teaching support staff

Findings summary

- There is a wide range of relationships between L+T staff and feedback practice dependant on faculty/ the way their role has been configured within it. This ranges from a team driving learning and teaching to support staff as purely technical (as a medium for Canvas implementation/outsourcing input). Consequently understanding and confidence around feedback is very mixed.
- Roles/focal points/KPIs also vary significantly - From helping with relevant tech requests to trying to focus on improving efficiencies in teaching practice.
- While assisting with improving feedback practice could be part of their role (it falls within their remit of responsibility), it doesn’t generally take place (largely due to priority, visibility, requiring external incitement)
- Visibility of feedback practice varies but seems to be low: Because they are not working within a course, or generally helping with running/student interactions they don’t have visibility
- Capacity to influence varies, but not overall very high, largely reliant on subject coordinators to be the instigator of any feedback related work/change
- Feedback related questions rarely come to the staff in this role (flows on from the fact that teaching staff do not have the awareness that it needs changing (lacking feedback on feedback))
- While some might be aware of poor practices/think it should be better, this by itself doesn’t convert into motivation to incite change. Other more immediate priorities/KPIs weigh more heavily
- From the comments collected L+T staff feel that they have minimal capacity (access and time) to impact feedback practice.
- Seen more so through the lens of assessment - as this is where a larger amount of energy/logistics is required
- Instigation is seen as the main blocker to changing feedback practice. (So being allowed in/given the capacity and remit to work on changes)

Insights

- Through previous discussions it appeared it might be possible to inspire interest in making changes in this sphere, and consequently embed change through assisting L+T staff to action. Through this investigation it has become apparent that due to a range of factors this is not really an option.
- The variance in roles and directives for different L+T groups means that a common approach would not be effective.
- Potentially difficult to align with key values due to varied KPIs
- Lack of capacity to personally instigate leaves minimal room for action