Examination Feedback for undergraduates
David Sheppard, Academic Officer, Union of UEA Students

Recommendations

A) To introduce for 2010 exam semester:

A policy requiring feedback on all "summer" examinations (not including course tests) for all non-finalists. Academic staff would be responsible for deciding which version of feedback would be relevant (and manageable) in their discipline/school.

The policy should include suggested areas of best practice which might include:
> generic feedback to all students
> publishing annotated model answers
> individual feedback on request ("surgeries")
> a lecture/seminar discussing exams that had been recently sat

B) To examine the possibility of a system where students could view or be returned their own exam scripts. If feasible such a system should be implemented as soon as possible, with alterations to the regulations and procedures made accordingly.

This would allow increased self-assessment and peer-to-peer feedback, and allow students to receive personalised feedback from academics (particularly if facing reassessment).

The case for feedback on examinations

To suggest that feedback on examinations is essential we might want to consider the role of assessment in taught programmes. Gibbs[1] suggests that assessment has six main functions:

1. Capturing student time and attention
2. Generating appropriate student learning activity
3. Providing timely feedback which students pay attention to
4. Helping students to internalise the discipline's standards and notions of quality
5. Marking: generating marks or grades to distinguish between students or which enable pass/fail decisions to be made.
6. Quality assurance: providing evidence for others outside the course to enable them to judge the appropriateness of standards on the course.

Certainly exams at UEA allow 5 and 6 to take place. Students sit them and then learn, via a numerical grade, how well or badly they have done. Because most exams at UEA count towards final degree classification, there is no doubt that this form of

---

[1] 'Using Assessment Strategically to Change the Way Students Learn" *Assessment Matters in Higher Education* (Brown, S and Glasner, A. eds) SRHE and OUP:1999 pp. 41-55

assessment fulfils function 1 as well. But should exams also fulfil functions 2, 3 and 4? Or are exams seen as a cost-effective way of doing 5 and 6 with other forms of assessment fulfilling the other functions? And if exams are largely for functions 5 and 6 then why do students sit them at the end of first year? If UEA exams are primarily for grading and quality assurance purposes perhaps they should only be used when a student has "finished" learning - at the end of their final year.

Uncertainty about the role of examinations certainly contributes to weaker scores in the section "Assessment and Feedback" in the National Student Survey [NSS] for UEA undergraduates:

Year	Measure	Assessment and feedback	5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	8. I have received detailed comments on my work.	9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.
2005	Mean score	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.5
2005	% Agree	62	66	66	56
2006	Mean score	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.6
2006	% Agree	69	73	72	61
2007	Mean score	3.7	3.9	3.8	3.6
2007	% Agree	67	72	69	59
2008	Mean score	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.6
2008	% Agree	70	75	72	62

These figures compare with an overall satisfaction mean score of 4.4 and with 91% of UEA students agreeing with the statement "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course" UEA NSS2008.

Although UEA students highly praise the feedback they receive on written assignments, many repeatedly note their dissatisfaction with the role that examinations played in their learning. Recent negative comments include:

 "Most of the degree is based on the exams at the end." BIO NSS 2008
"Assessment of coursework and exams did not fairly represent the course. Exams (apart from the exception of one) where an unfair test of knowledge and as result unfairly marked." BIO NSS 2008
"Annoying that so much of the total mark is based on exams. Should be a higher emphasis on coursework or other non-examination criteria." HIS NSS 2008

"Some modules were supposed to be coursework only which is one reason I chose UEA. I was disappointed to find that that meant a course test was involved which I felt was too much like an exam, so did not feel like those modules were coursework only." MTH NSS 2008

The lack of feedback on examinations also inspires negative comments:

"Little advice on how to improve your exam marks." BIO NSS 2008
"The universities policy of not allowing students exam scripts back for observation or providing any additional feedback about them" HIS NSS 2008
"No real support after the examination results or advice from the staff." LAW NSS 2008
"Poor amount of feedback on work, especially exams. We get given scores, but no actual feedback, and we can't see our exam papers even when we are given scores, nor are we allowed to take the question papers home with us, so when we are given the numerical scores months later we can't remember what they relate to so we don't know what went well and what went badly." MED NSS 2008

Student representatives in MED recently submitted a paper to their SSLC asking the School to consider improvements to the examination feedback [see Appendix A]. That paper, combined with analyses of National Student Survey results, has led to several significant improvements in the assessment arrangements in MED. These arrangements now include increased use of methods such as generic feedback to all students and detailed feedback on request. Such examples would be included in the list (see **Recommendation A**) of potential feedback methods that schools might wish to adopt.

Comments from NSS2008 also illustrate a need to improve "feedforward"; ensuring that exams are fully embedded into the teaching and learning on a particular module:

"I feel we should have been told how to approach exams, how to structure them and what sort of content they would like. I have got good marks in my coursework, but terrible marks in my exams. Despite this i class myself as a good student and feel having exams like this where i really don't know what to put in the answers is a major stumbling block for me." BIO NSS 2008

"There is too little feedback and few opportunities to practice exam style questions prior to the exams. While lecturers are busy and unable to set essays or problem questions once a week, once a month should be feasible, and very few members of the faculty are willing to check over attempted exam answers." LAW NSS2008

One method of improving feedback and "feedforward" for students would be to facilitate self and peer-to-peer feedback. But these methods are currently impossible because scripts are so difficult to obtain and some Schools wish to re-use examination questions in subsequent years. **Recommendation B** stems from a desire to allow Schools to use these methods.

Exam Feedback in action!

Case Study A: Heriot-Watt University

The policy of Heriot-Watt University [HWU] (included in full in Appendix B) offers non-finalists the opportunity to get feedback on their examinations. It was introduced in 2008-09 following a campaign by the students' association that won a NUS award for campaign of the year 2007-08. The policy introduced for the academic year 2008-09 is based upon two precepts:

a) Precept One
Students on a HWU campus should be given the opportunity to see their examination scripts after each examination diet.

b) Precept Two
Students should be given the opportunity to receive feedback on examination performance.

The key word in this policy is clearly "opportunity"; the onus lies with the students to accept or decline the "opportunity". The Heriot-Watt policy also includes a list of examination feedback best practice.

Case Study B: Leeds University

The School of English at Leeds University offers generic feedback on examinations. Below is an excerpt for Leeds University's website. [See http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/good_practice/page_03.htm]

"The School of English now publishes exam feedback from core undergraduate modules in the Nathan Bodington building. Module co-ordinators describe common errors and highlight good practice. The School has also developed a suite of materials that provide students with the opportunity to engage with past exams and Assessment Criteria, together with samples of students' work. Director of Learning & Teaching... has provided a commentary on why the selected samples received the marks that they did. This innovative resource has been welcomed by students in the School and provides the inspiration for the new Faculty-wide Assessment & Feedback website."

Case Study C: Bristol University

The School of Economics, Finance and Management at Bristol University offers generic feedback to students on each first and second year exam through examination marking reports. The School also makes these reports public for future students. [See http://www.bris.ac.uk/efm/current-undergraduates/exams/exam-reports.html] Below is an excerpt from a report on "Principles of Finance Examination 2008". Although the report is not the most encouraging, it does offer a model for generic feedback.

Overall summary

A mixed bag of scripts, with marks in the range 6% to 92%. Students appeared to have tried question spotting and, in many cases, this left them having to attempt questions that they were quite obviously unprepared for. While many of the calculations were well done, students struggled to make meaningful comments when asked to apply theory to a particular situation. As in previous exams even the most basic of practical comments appeared to be beyond any but the best students

Question 1: Number of attempts 76 Average mark 12.0 Range 1-21

(a)(i) Most candidates incorrectly adjusted for inflation for years t = 2 and t=3. A common (erroneous) method was to calculate t=1 inflation adjusted sales correctly as £1,150,000 * 1.03 = £1,184,500, but then to add £25,000 & apply a factor of 1.035 to get t=2 sales of £1,251.83. This was because candidates failed to recognise that the £25,000 increase was at t = 0 prices and had to be adjusted for 2 years worth of inflation. (1,150 + 25)*1.03*1.055 = 1252.61

(b) The answers to part (b) were poor.

At b(ii) few candidates correctly presented the first and second differentials from which it can be shown that for the SOC top be negative then μ must be negative and thus for the FOC to be positive γ must be negative. δ disappears in the differentiation and can be either sign.

At b (iii) very few candidates commented on the properties of U(W).

Case Study D: Nottingham University

The University of Nottingham offers examples of good practice for the giving of feedback on exams. [See http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/courses-office/good-practice/assessment/exam-feedback.htm] These include:
> (a) making available copies of previous papers with annotated answers and a breakdown of the examination marking scheme
> (b) providing a summary of strengths and weaknesses in answers to questions and how adequately students used the information taught in the module in answering the questions.
> (c) instituting generic sessions with continuing students to help improve examination techniques
> (d) holding 'open' sessions where students can view their examination performance

Case Study E: University of Manchester

The School of Computer Sciences at the University of Manchester has provided generic feedback on exams for its students since 2002-03. [See http://intranet.cs.man.ac.uk/Study_subweb/Ugrad/exams/ug-exams/]. Below Is an extract from the feedback from the module "Object Oriented Programming 1".

"(1) Students struggle to answer questions where they have to write code. Usually, they cannot remember well the syntax of the Java language and they get confused defining functions where input parameters need to be passed, and making use of those parameters in the function. They also get confused when they are asked to write the constructor of a class. In most cases, they write the definition of the data members of the class, instead of the class constructor.

(2) Students seemed to do better in the multiple choice questions, because they only had to look at the provided code and judge/find where it was correct or incorrect. However, a significant number of them made the same mistakes, choosing an incorrect option over a correct one, which would differ only in a small detail. In those cases, I was reconsidering their choices. There were also a couple of ambiguous questions, which could be interpreted in different ways. For those, I was also making considerations. Generally, I was satisfied to see that some of the students can read and understand well java code."

Although increased use of generic feedback on exams would represent a step forward at UEA, students in Manchester have also begun the "I'm Hungry for Feedback" campaign which calls for more personalised feedback to be provided alongside the generic. [See >http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?sid=59c19463634c90d5c69e39430 a26c52c&gid=55242717036<].

Conclusions

The implementation of **Recommendation A** of this paper would represent a definite step forward at UEA. It allows for the differences in disciplines to be taken into account and is in line with practice at a variety of institutions across the sector. There is clear evidence that UEA students would support its introduction and it builds upon good practice that currently exists in some UEA Schools.

Recommendation B is more problematic and its introduction would require considerable changes to policy and practice at UEA. However if the University is to implement changes as a result of students' demands for personalised feedback, then this will only be possible if students are able to access their scripts. Only with the investigation and implementation of Recommendation B will UEA students be able to hold informed discussions of their exam performance with their peers, analyse where they were successful or unsuccessful themselves and if possible, conduct discussions with members of academic staff.

How students would like feedback

Introduction

Assessment feedback is one of the main areas of discontent amongst UEA medical students both in terms of its timeliness and content.

Students feel the purpose of feedback should be to help them evaluate their performance in order to improve. Currently on the whole this is not being achieved because feedback is too non-specific and too long after the assessment.

What feedback students would like

Advance notice paper

Details of which sections students performed badly in both SAQ and EMQ e.g. which domains questions they failed were from.

Ideally a breakdown of where marks were gained/lost within each SAQ question.

Some method of giving students a better idea where in the year they came, ideally on a frequency distribution graph with a line showing where they were.

Detailed feedback available from advisors when students start back in September, with advisors being told they must contact students within 2 weeks of students starting back.

IP OSCE

A printed sheet with marks for each station in student's pigeon hole 2 weeks after IP results are published.

Breakdown of performance in each station available from advisors when students start back in September.

Again some method of giving students a better idea where in the year they came, ideally on a frequency distribution graph with a line showing where they were.

Unit OSCE

A printed sheet with marks for each station that is placed in student's pigeon hole 2 weeks after the OSCE.

A breakdown of performance in each station being available from advisors 3 weeks after the OSCE that students are able to look at and make brief notes based on.

SSS

Results on evision within 1 week of presentation.

Detailed feedback available from advisors within 2 weeks.

AR

Results on evision within 4 weeks of submission.

Detailed feedback available from advisors within 5 weeks.

POLICY ON FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS ON EXAMINATION PERFORMANCE

1. Background

1.1 The following policy has been developed by the Learning and Teaching Board. This follows the approval by the University Senate at its meeting on 5 March 2008 of the proposal that students should normally be allowed to view their own examination scripts after each diet where possible and to receive appropriate feedback on their performance.

2. Precept One

Students on a HWU campus should be given the opportunity to see their examination scripts after each examination diet.

2.1 It should be noted that allowing students to view their examination scripts does not constitute 'feedback'.

2.2 This policy does not apply to final year undergraduate or final diet postgraduate taught course students who will gain no benefit from viewing examination scripts in terms of improving performance. At the present time, the policy does not apply to students at the Dubai Campus or to off-campus students, for whom this would be difficult to manage logistically.

2.3 It should be noted that, in accordance with Freedom of Information and the UK Data Protection Act, students have no legal right to see their examination scripts. However, the University Data Protection Officer has confirmed that the Act does allow discretion to universities to provide access to examination scripts if they wish to do so.

2.4 Whilst students do not have a legal right to see their examination scripts, they do have the right to view any written comments made on examination scripts. Members of staff should be made aware of this and advised to manage their comments appropriately .

2.5 Scripts will continue to be owned by the University and must be returned to the University immediately after being viewed by students. Schools will need to implement a process to manage and control access to examination scripts, for example, by distributing and collecting during a review session.

2.6 The University has the right to refuse access to a script (but not to any written comments made on the script) where this is considered to be appropriate, for example, where there is evidence that a script may have been tampered with or where there are disciplinary issues that need to be considered.

3. Precept Two

Students should be given the opportunity to receive feedback on examination performance.

3.1 This policy does not apply to final year undergraduate or final diet postgraduate taught course students (who will gain no benefit from feedback with respect to improving performance), nor to off-campus students unless it is appropriate to post generic comments on Vision or where relevant members of academic staff will have an opportunity to provide face-to-face feedback

3.2 It is for the School to identify the most appropriate method of providing feedback, depending on the discipline, class size and level of study. Schools should also pay particular attention to the importance of providing feedback in first year.

4. Good Practice

4.1 Some examples of successful methods used to provide access to examination scripts and to feedback include:
• Examination workshops timetabled the following semester to go through examination performance and overall learning points. This is particularly relevant for core modules.

• Provision of feedback through generic commentary for all students, highlighting learning points perhaps posted on Vision.

• Individual feedback coversheets relating to examination scripts detailing how a student performed. This could also be used to assist off-campus students.

• One-to-one feedback provided by mentors, tutors or relevant lecturers. This method is particularly appropriate for failing or at risk students.

5. Other Issues

5.1 The University Regulation relating to Student Appeals (Regulation 36) will need to be amended to refer to appeals submitted after students have viewed their examination scripts and/or received feedback and to confirm that the existing grounds for appeal will stand. This should be actioned immediately and should come into effect as soon as possible. There will not be any opportunity for students to appeal on the grounds of academic judgement ie against a mark or grade awarded or against feedback provided.

5.2 No other existing University Ordinances, Regulations or Policies are affected by the introduction of this policy.

5.3 Students should be made aware of this Policy through the normal communication routes, for example, by inclusion of a reference to the policy in student handbooks. Any issues/feedback arising from the policy should be discussed in Schools at Student-Staff Liaison Committee meetings and communicated to Class Representatives.

5.4 This policy will formally come into effect from the start of Academic Session 2008/9, but Schools may wish to introduce earlier where possible.

Prof R J M Craik, Deputy Principal (Learning & Teaching)
Talat Yaqoob, Student Association
Kathy Patterson, Academic Registrar and Deputy Secretary
22nd April 2008