

Enhancing Feedback and Assessment (EnFA) Project

Student Partners: Hannah Harrison and Mattie Osborne

Supervisor Partners: Rachel Kyte and Dr Terri Grant

Abstract

Rationale: Strengthening communication and student support are university priorities. Feedback is an important component of this and should enable students to realise their academic potential. The School of Allied Health and Community (SAHC) scored significantly under the University of Worcester (UoW) average in the assessment and feedback metric in the 2022-23 National Student Survey (NSS), with Occupational Therapy (OT) and Physiotherapy (PT) reporting the most significant reductions in their scores.

Aims: This SAP project aimed to explore Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy student perspectives of assessment and feedback, and what makes this fair and effective.

Method: A participatory action research (PAR) approach was chosen to empower students and ensure active engagement in data collection and analysis and enable co-production of an action plan to improve practice (Baum et al, 2006, pp. 854). Two students were recruited through the SAP scheme and planned and led an online focus group to explore student perspectives on assessment and feedback. Ethical approval was granted by the Health and Sciences Research Ethics Panel. Student partners transcribed and thematically analysed the data. The research team worked together to produce an action plan and the final report.

Results: Two participants were recruited, one from the BSc OT course and one from the BSc PT course. Recruitment was challenging due to the timing of clinical placements, assessment deadlines, availability of researchers and 'feedback fatigue'. Themes included: lack of consistency across modules, staff accessibility, transparency of expectations and peer support and feedback. The emotional impact of assessment was noted throughout the data.

Action Plan: Staff are planning an audit of Blackboard to improve consistency and accessibility of assessment information, improve guidance on and consistency of tutorial support, explore the increased use of exemplars, and encourage team reflection on the emotional impact of assessment and how this can be mitigated.

Introduction

Strengthening communication and student support are university priorities. Feedback is an important component of student support and can be a “powerful process for learning” (Dawson, Carless and Lee, 2021 pp.286). Effective assessment and feedback processes should enable students to realise their academic potential, a focus of the UoW Learning and Teaching Strategy (2020-2025).

The SAHC scored significantly under the UoW average in the assessment and feedback metric in the 2022-23 NSS, with 63.5% satisfaction overall compared with the UoW average of 75.5%. The clarity of assessment criteria and the usefulness of feedback were areas of low satisfaction in the school (61.18% and 60.36% respectively). OT and PT had the most significant reductions in their NSS scores in relation to assessment and feedback and were at least 10 points below the assessment and feedback subject benchmarks. This issue is shared across pre-registration OT and PT programmes where the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) identified that only 76% of students found feedback useful, compared to the UoW average of 84%.

This project aimed to work with OT and PT students to explore student perspectives of the following questions:

- 1) How can we make assessment criteria clearer?
- 2) What makes marking and assessment fair?
- 3) How can we ensure feedback helps you improve your work?

Main section

This study used a participatory action research (PAR) approach. PAR has been defined as “collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves” (Baum et al 2006 p854). This approach was chosen to empower students and ensure active engagement in data collection and analysis and enable co-production of an action plan to improve practice.

Following the SAP recruitment and introduction process, student researchers Hannah Harrison (HH) and Mattie Osborne (MO) from the SAHC, joined with Dr Terri Grant (TG) and Rachel Kyte (RK) to recruit students to participants for in-person focus groups. Student-led focus groups were chosen to enable student views on assessment and feedback to be explored in greater depth than the NSS, allowing for sharing and discussion of ideas, which would not be possible with other methods of qualitative data collection such as 1:1 interviews. Ethical approval was granted by the Health and Sciences Research Ethics Panel.

An email invitation and participation information sheet were sent out by a course administrator to all current students on the undergraduate and pre-registration OT and PT courses. Potential participants

were asked to email the student researchers to express their interest and were then emailed a consent form and asked to sign up to attend a focus group of their choosing from a set of pre-defined dates.

Recruitment was challenging due to the demands of the OT and PT courses, assessment deadlines and placement dates. Course reps also fed back that there was a sense of feedback fatigue amongst their cohorts. To enhance recruitment the team decided to change to online evening focus groups and student partners developed a recruitment video to explain the project aims in a more engaging way. Ethical approval was gained for these amendments.

Meanwhile the student researchers explored the importance of reflexivity when conducting focus groups (Olgas-Vega *et al*, 2023; Jamieson, Govaart and Pownall, 2023) and were encouraged to reflect on the impact their own thoughts and experiences of assessment and feedback could have on data collection and analysis.

Two participants were recruited, one PT and one OT student, and after gaining consent and ensuring all ethical obligations were adhered to, an online focus group was held which HH facilitated. Despite the lack of participants included in this group, a lively and insightful session was held. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed by HH. It was agreed that a full thematic analysis would be inappropriate with so few voices, however, researchers independently analysed the transcripts, then met to discuss the emerging themes.

Outcomes

4 key themes emerged from the preliminary data analysis: consistency across modules, transparency of expectations, peer support and accessibility of staff. A further thread of the emotional impact of assessment was weaved throughout the data.

Consistency Across Modules

It was noted by participants that there was a lack of consistency across modules with how and when assessment information was presented and explained. Some staff discussed assessment briefs in class and others supported this with a PowerPoint recording on Blackboard. At times students perceived discrepancies between the assessment information in the module outline and the information given in class on slides or verbally.

They reported that rubrics were sometimes difficult to interpret in relation to the assessment task. Formatting of rubrics differed across modules (font, layout, colour) which affected accessibility for some.

“somebody said this week that they just found the rubric really hard to get their head round.”

(P2)

Some module leaders explained the rubrics in-depth and how these related to assessment tasks which was helpful.

Transparency of Expectations

Participants noted that they felt the transition between each year of the course could be challenging, and sometimes it was felt that the increased expectations had not always been communicated as effectively as possible.

“I know from our experiences of going from second year to 3rd year, that there's been a real huge, the first assignments that everyone did in third year, there is sort of a huge, mass upset.” (P1)

Peer Support

There were mixed experience of peer support. Students reported that they understood and appreciated the benefits of the peer formative feedback model, however this needed careful explaining and implementation, particularly when students were used to receiving tutor feedback. Students found peer classroom activities such as discussing exemplars or devising an assessment plan as a whole class helpful.

Participants reported peer support from students in different year groups was valuable:

“That makes a huge difference I think, me knowing people in the years above me and asking them questions and vice versa. Now I know a few people in the years below and they ask me questions and there is that chain of passing information on.” (P1)

WhatsApp groups were a source of both anxiety and support around assessment times, reinforcing the juxtaposition peer support can hold.

Accessibility of Staff

Participants reported differing experiences of the accessibility and availability of staff tutorials in relation to assessment and feedback. They felt there were ‘grey areas’ in how much support assessment support was allowed outside of lectures. One participant noted that they had been able to access consistent tutorial support with assessment preparation on a previous course but noted more variable tutorial availability on their current professional course. In contrast, the other participant had not realised that tutorials were available to all students, instead believing they were only accessible once a student had performed below expectations.

“Is everyone allowed the tutorial or is that just if you failed it first time you get a tutorial?”. (P2)

Emotional Impact of Assessment

A final theme that emerged, was the emotional impact of assessments and feedback. This was not initially noted by the student researchers, potentially because it is something that they experience so much it is accepted. Conversely, the academic researchers reflected that staff sometimes overlook this aspect of assessment. These findings reinforced the importance of reflexivity within focus groups. Participants had noted:

"I think having the emotional, because you know, when you hand it in, you have that such adrenaline dump of 'ohh God it's in' and then you have 20 days and you almost forget about it for about the first 15 and then somebody someone goes, 'all the results are out' and then that wave of emotion comes back." (P1)

"When you get all your marks back, everyone's often isolated, on their own, and the module's finished. So you sit there with your results and you and usually our WhatsApp group goes crazy, and you have a bit of a chat if you're in, but quite often I'm just sat there at home with my result and my feedback." (P2)

On feedback: "The way it's written makes such a difference to the way I feel quite a lot of the time." (P2)

Impact

Action research involves a continual cycle of observing, reflecting, planning and acting. Having reflected on the focus group results the team have put together a plan of action in readiness for the 2024/25 academic year. We hope to observe the impact of the action plan through further focus groups and NSS/CES data.

Action Plan

- Blackboard audit: staff will complete an audit to ensure consistency and clarity of assessment information and grading rubrics.
- Provide clearer information to students re: tutorials.
- Trial the consistent use of assessment discussion boards on Blackboard to increase parity of access to information.
- Exploring the increased use of exemplars to help clarify expectations.
- Reflect further on the emotional impact of assessment and feedback and how this can be mitigated.

Conclusions

This project explored OT and PT student experiences of assessment and feedback and has led to an action plan for staff to implement next academic year. Key areas for enhancement include ensuring consistency and clarity of assessment information, providing clearer information on tutorial support, exploring the increased use of exemplars and using discussion boards consistently across modules.

This SAP project enabled our student partners to develop their communication and project management skills, juggling this project alongside their academic work. They developed their digital capabilities by producing a recruitment video and their presentation skills by disseminating their work at the Learning and Teaching conference.

Recommendations and potential future developments

It would not be appropriate to make broad recommendations based on a single small focus group, however our preliminary data suggests that consistency of modular information, clarity of rubrics and assessment briefs, tutorials and peer support are areas that could be explored if seeking to enhance assessment and feedback processes. Staff should also be mindful of the emotional impact that assessment and feedback may have on students.

The team hope to conduct further focus groups next academic year to hear the views of a wider range of students. The project could be developed further to include students across a wider range of courses to enable good practice to be shared across the university.

References

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