The Principles of Effective Feedback

Feedback on your academic work is often a point of contention and one which you raise consistently year on year. Whether that's because it's not been returned on time and you've not been informed why, you can't read the handwriting, or the feedback is so basic that it gives little indication how you can improve. That's why we spent a large chunk of our first Course Rep Conference last year asking students and academics alike to discuss the ways in which feedback is most useful.

Following your feedback on feedback the Students' Union took a paper to College which suggested three principles of feedback and several recommendations for improving the speed and clarity of your feedback.

We are delighted to announce that, having gone through the College's academic governance process, the paper has now passed through Academic Board, the highest academic committee at RHUL, and the work stemming from our collaborative conference has made effective change in policy.

A definitive answer to the age old question.

All assessed work (other than formal examinations) should be returned *with feedback* within **20 working days of the submission deadline**. There are some cases where it is not appropriate to do so (although it is expected that these situations will be for exceptional and/or pedagogic reasons, such as dissertations or staff illness and/or where an extension to the submission deadline has been granted). This section also stresses that a deadline of the return of marked work with feedback should also be made clear, with any changes being communicated to students as soon as possible.

What is good feedback?

Well, now you know. This policy confirms that feedback should be available for all forms of assessments/assignments and it is acknowledged that feedback can be provided in a variety of formats. The paper also mandates that opportunities to compare feedback across a number of assessments should be provided to students periodically (likely through the Personal Tutor system).

The policy also includes the three principles of feedback created by RHSU after the Student Voice Conference 2018 which mandates that feedback:
- should be clear about academic performance
- should be constructive
- should be given in time to ensure its relevance to students work, and allow its use in subsequent assignments.

Exam feedback

The policy confirms that feedback on written exams should be expected by students and that this can happen through either generic feedback, highlighting common mistakes, excellent work and areas to develop, that is made available for the entire cohort or through individual feedback sessions with personalised feedback from academic staff.

So what does this mean for me as a course rep?

You should ensure that you understand the document in its entirety and get in touch with RHSU if you have any questions. This document will also be made available to you to reference against should any conversations about this arise in SSCs. This also means that if you are not receiving feedback on any type of assessments, you can lobby your department to do this as it is an RHUL policy from May 2018.

Summary of Business for
Academic Board

Title	**Policy on the return of marked student work and feedback**
Author/ Comments	Marina Beck, Head of Academic Quality and Policy Office Mark Crompton, Head of Educational Development James McEvoy, Associate Dean (Education), Science Faculty
Date	14 March 2018
Status	Freely Available
Document type	For Approval
Summary	The following policy on the *Return of marked student work with feedback* was approved by Academic Board on 3rd June 2010. *Assessed work (other than formal examinations) should be returned with feedback within 4 weeks of the submission deadline, except in cases where it is not appropriate to do so for exceptional reasons. The deadline for the return of the marked work should be made clear to students when they receive their assignments. In the event that the intended deadline cannot be met, the revised deadline must be communicated to students as soon as possible.* Following consideration of sector research at a meeting of the Teaching and Learning Strategy Committee (TLSC) and the Quality and Standards Committee (QASC) on 27 September and thereafter at a meeting of QASC on 15 November it was agreed not to reduce the turnaround time but rather to make minor amendments to the wording. These are illustrated in bold in the attached policy. This revised wording was circulated to departments by the Senior VP (Academic) at the end of the Autumn term. Further to this, at a meeting of the TLSC on 17 January it was agreed that proposed feedback expectations, which were discussed there, would be integrated into the policy and subsequent to that that guidance on exam feedback would also be included. The final version was considered at QASC on 27 February.
Paper referred from	TLSC and QASC
Recommendation	That Academic Board approve (i) the attached policy *Policy on the return of marked student work and feedback; and* (ii) the associated implementation plan to take effect from May 2018 (when PELP students start). The associated good guidance provides examples of some ways in which examination feedback might be given.

Policy on the return of marked student work and feedback

Return of marked student work and feedback

All assessed work (other than formal examinations) should be returned with feedback within **20 working days*** of the submission deadline, except in cases where it is not appropriate to do so for exceptional **and/ or pedagogic** reasons. **These may include the assessment of dissertations, final year projects, taped case studies, audio visual submissions, where the marking has been delayed due to staff illness and/ or where an extension to the submission deadline has been granted.**

The deadline for the return of the marked work **with feedback** should be made clear to students when they receive their assignments. In the event that the intended deadline cannot be met **for reasons such as those listed above**, the revised deadline must be communicated to students as soon as possible.

***Working days are Mondays to Fridays inclusive when the College is open for normal business. This includes periods outside of College term dates (vacation periods). Weekends, Bank holidays and College closure days around Easter and Christmas/ New Year are not regarded as working days (even if the Library is open on some of these days for study purposes).**

Please note that even if annual leave is being taken the requirement to return assessed work with feedback within 20 working days of the submission deadline applies. This will mean that when taking annual leave, colleagues may have to manage return of assessments with feedback within a shorter period than 20 days.

Feedback

Forms of feedback[1]

Feedback should be available for all assessments/assignments, including dissertations, projects and examinations (see guidance below).

Feedback can be provided in a variety of formats. In addition to written/typed/on-line feedback on assignments, feedback can be audio/video recorded, provided verbally in classes/tutorials, etc. Feedback is typically provided by teachers on individual assignments, but can be an overview of the attainment of a group of students, for dissemination to students and possibly to Personal Tutors. Feedback can take the form of both comments relating to specific issues (e.g. marginal comments on written work), and general comments bringing the main points together.

Peer feedback can be a valuable activity for both provider and recipient in developing reflection and understanding.

Opportunities to compare feedback across a number of assessments should be provided to students periodically, e.g. through the Personal Tutor system.

Feedback should be clear about academic performance

The language used in feedback should explicitly match the assessment/marking criteria and attainment level descriptors, which should be provided to the students in advance of completing the

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[1] **Reference:** David J. Nicol & Debra Macfarlane-Dick (2006) Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice, Studies in Higher Education, 31:2, 199-218, DOI: 10.1080/03075070600572090

assignment. Marking 'rubrics' can be helpful in many circumstances, while also recognising that it will not always be appropriate to deduce a mark mathematically from performance in each of the criteria.

Activities that help students to understand the assessment criteria in advance of being assessed can be extremely helpful. This might include self-assessment, peer-assessment, or assessing 'model' work.

Activities that help students to understand the feedback, for example group discussions, can also be extremely valuable.

Feedback should be constructive

Feedback should carry a respectful tone, and contain a balance of both affirmative and developmental comments. Affirmative comments foster confidence and identify good practices that should be continued. Developmental (feed-forward) comments should always be provided, and clearly identify attainable goals to improve performance in future assignments.

Feedback proformas etc. should be designed to ensure that 'feed-forward' comments, and other good practices, are included. The structure of the feedback might constitute a 'feedback sandwich'. Potentially negative feedback can be framed in a constructive way, for example by commenting on the merits of features that nonetheless warrant further development.

There should be careful consideration of the number of developmental comments in a piece of feedback, avoiding over-long lists, and identifying an attainable number of targeted actions to raise attainment from the current level in a structured feedback section. Comments on less central issues could be made elsewhere (e.g. marginal comments on written work).

Where an assignment has multiple markers, there should be explicit mechanisms to promote consistency in academic expectations, and in feedback approaches/volume.

Feedback timing

Assessment/feedback timings should be planned such that students receive feedback soon enough after the task for it to retain its relevance, and sufficiently in advance of upcoming related assignments to allow students to act upon the feedback.

Feedback should be returned within the College's stipulated maximum feedback deadline (with the exception of specifically exempted assignments), see first section above.

Students' use of feedback

Students should engage with the feedback provided on their assignments at the earliest possible opportunity, to ensure that they understand its relevance to their work, and that they can apply it to their subsequent assignments.

Students should take all of the opportunities provided to obtain and benefit from feedback on their work, and be aware that it may take many forms (e.g. written, verbal, recorded, on line, from peers).

Examination feedback

Exams as summative and formative assessments

Written exams are an important assessment tool in most departments. For many of us they are the main way in which we measure the extent to which an individual, unaided student has met the learning outcomes of a course. The summative character of examinations is also crucial. Students are expected to integrate the content and concepts that they learned in the course and to demonstrate their understanding in answering questions, writing essays and solving problems.

Exams may serve an educational purpose beyond the purely diagnostic. All of the assessments students undergo during their programme of study, including the exams that they

take before their final exams at the end of their programme, have the potential to form students' minds and prepare them for future assessments in their programme. This formative use of examinations is made particularly valuable by the relative rarity of examinations – students have fewer chances to learn from their mistakes – and the heavy weighting of exam marks in many of our courses. The formative character of exams is only brought out, however, if students have the opportunity to revisit their work and receive feedback on it.

Exam feedback
There is an expectation that students are provided with feedback on mid-programme written exams, which may be given in the following ways. The whole cohort may be sent generic feedback which identifies common mistakes, gives examples of excellent work and encourages students to develop particular skills for future assessments. Alternatively, each student may be given the opportunity to see their own exam papers and to obtain personalized feedback from academic staff.

There will be times when generic feedback is appropriate, for instance when multiple-choice exams are used, when feedback must be provided quickly to prepare students for their next assessment, or when the administrative cost of individual feedback is unavoidably and prohibitively high. In most cases, though, efficiently-conducted individual feedback sessions provide most benefit to students at a reasonable cost of administrative and academic staff time. [2]

END OF
POLICY

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[2] Gibbs, G.; Simpson, C. Conditions Under Which Assessment Supports Students' Learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* **2004,** *1,* 3-31.

Policy implementation

This policy should be made
available:

- In all UG and PG handbook templates for 2018-19 and thereafter;

- In the training materials provided to student Course Representatives;

- In the training materials provided to student Faculty Representatives;

- In the papers supporting Student-Staff Committee meetings.

The expectations of this policy should constitute explicit terms of reference when developing post - NSS departmental action plans.

The expectations of this policy should constitute explicit terms of reference in Periodic Departmental
Reviews.

Implementation: good guidance on examination feedback

Within RHUL, the Departments of History and Geography and the School of Biological Sciences integrate individual exam feedback sessions into their tutorial systems. These departments are satisfied with their process and receive above-average "assessment and feedback" ratings in the NSS, and it therefore seems a sensible model to adopt across the College where possible. Administrative staff may organise Y1 and Y2 May exam scripts by student and give the script packs to personal tutors in September, who show them to their Y2 and Y3 tutees in the first individual meetings of the academic year. Although tutors will not have marked most of the scripts and will therefore be unable to comment in detail on the work, students are nonetheless able to read the comments on their scripts and can get a sense of how they, personally, can improve their performance. This often involves matters of exam technique, which tutors can discuss with their tutees.