Student perceptions of assessment feedback: when to guide and when to grade?

- an exploratory study based on the NSS feedback questions

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The 'new' world of HE?

Some issues for accounting education?

- **General – 'more for less' (or even 'better for less') agenda**

  – NSS questions driving an increase in feedback expectations, BUT….

  – Resource constraints

  – Need to move to blended/student-led forms of learning

  – Employers want self-learners not 'puppets'

- **Teaching and Learning**

  – Seeking to encourage independent learning and self-learning

  – Professional accreditation v. holistic education

  – Everyone cannot get a first, need to manage the curve

  – Difficult to provide totally objective and comprehensive feedback even in accounting subjects

  - e.g. I got a first but *why did I lose 30% of the marks?* Is often difficult to answer.
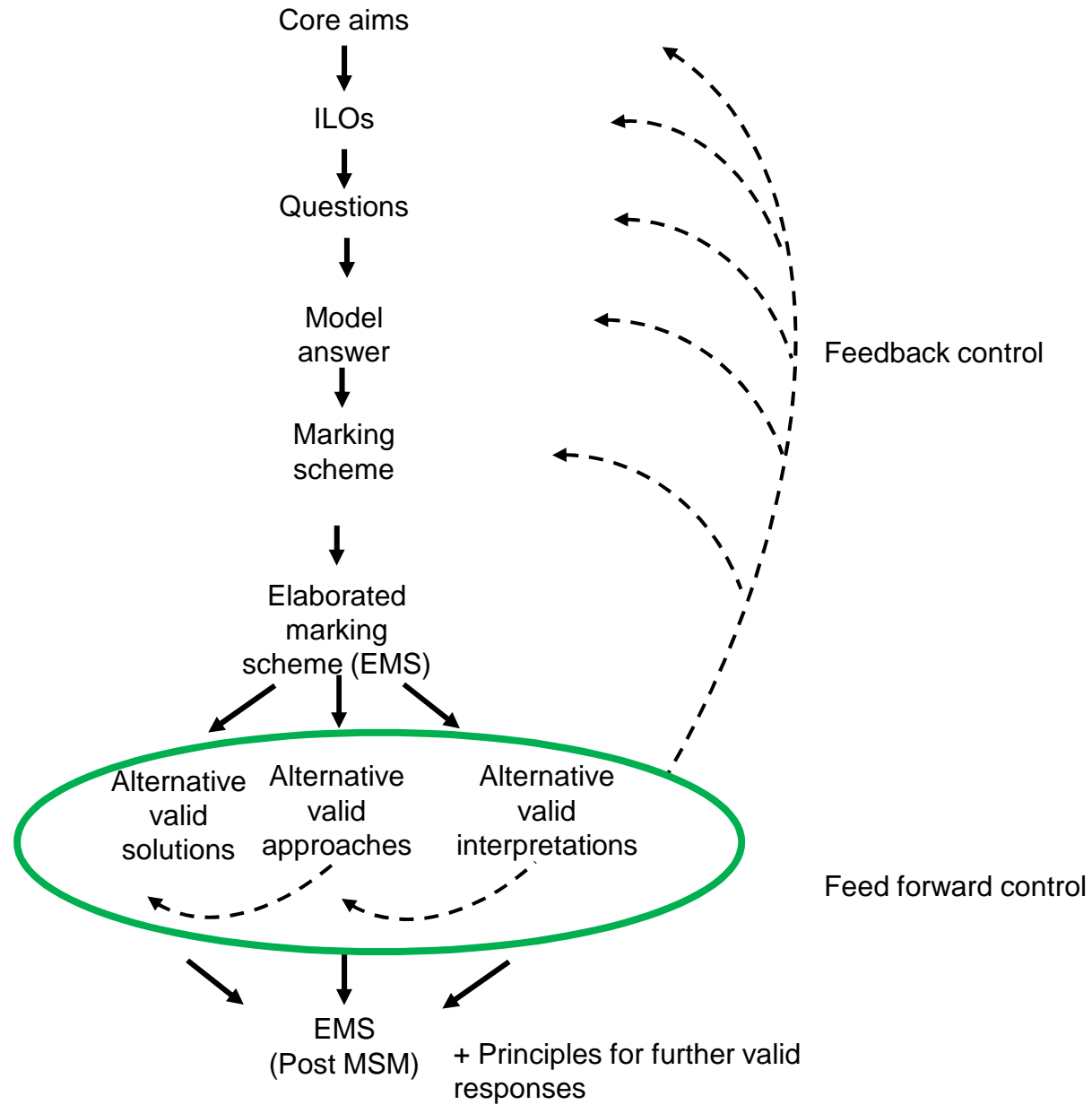
Point of departure…

- Herbert, Joyce and Hassall (2014)

- **Assessment in higher education: the potential for a Community of Practice to improve inter-marker reliability**

- Explored alignment between curriculum aims, teaching and assessment of student learning in a professional exam setting.

- Context was RELIABILITY & VALIDITY of marking in professional exams

- High formality, multi-layers of quality assurance, but…

- Wide variations in markers' first attempts

- Markers standardisation meeting seen as a 'Community of Practice'.

- Multiple feedback loops – overriding v. reinforcing importance of core aims

- Student feedback – to individual is nil, to all students is extensive & detailed

- Lessons for HE that alignment is crucial to teaching and assessment
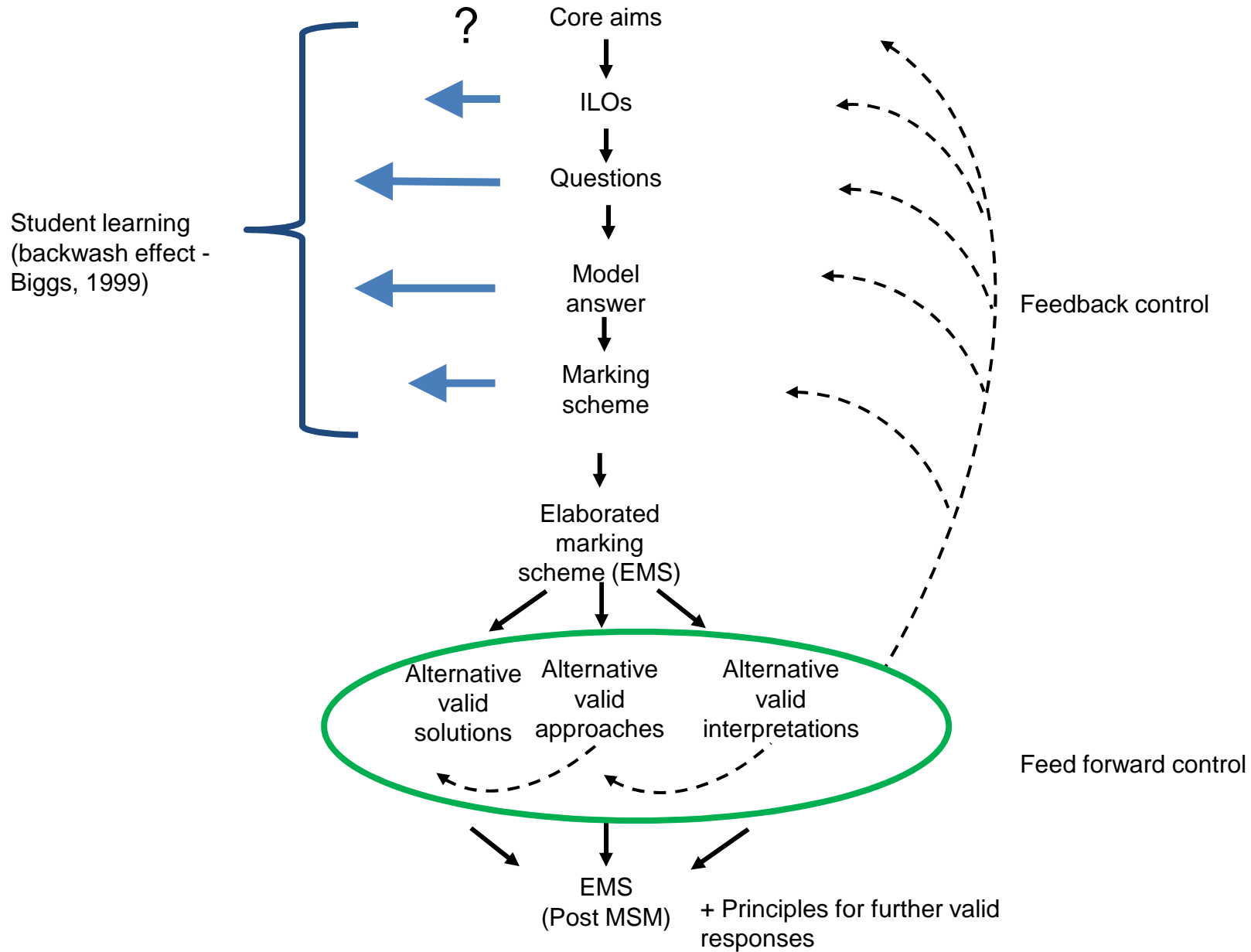
But alignment with what?
- Multiple (competing) dimensions

- – Knowledge – canonical, emerging?

- – Core aims?

- – Business context?

- – Transferable skills?

- – Quantitative v. qualitative preferences?

- – Technical v. creative/insightful?

- – Detail v. holistic?

- – Subjective v. objective?

- Unit of analysis was the markers' standardisation/calibration meeting

Multiple feedback loops

Core aims

$\downarrow$

ILOs

$\downarrow$

Questions

$\downarrow$

Model answer

$\downarrow$

Marking scheme

$\downarrow$

Elaborated marking scheme (EMS)

Alternative valid solutions   Alternative valid approaches   Alternative valid interpretations

Feedback control

Feed forward control

EMS (Post MSM)

+ Principles for further valid responses

Multiple feedback loops

? Core aims

Student learning
(backwash effect -
Biggs, 1999)

ILOs

Questions

Model
answer

Marking
scheme

Feedback control

Elaborated
marking
scheme (EMS)

Alternative
valid
solutions

Alternative
valid
approaches

Alternative
valid
interpretations

Feed forward control

EMS
(Post MSM)

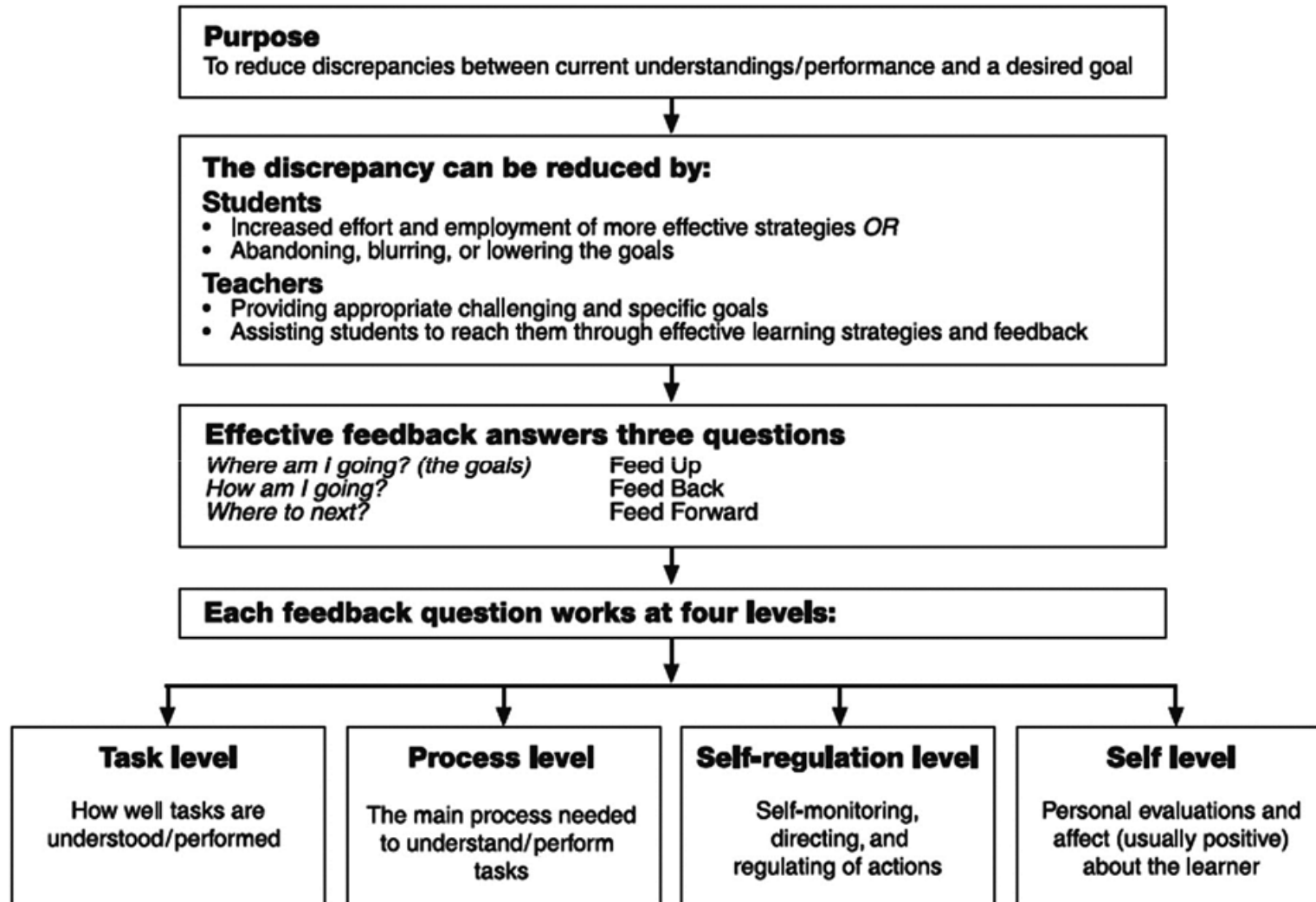+ Principles for further valid
responses

Feedback - literature review - themes

- **Motives for -** Eckel & King (2004) Kluger & DeNisi (1996) Ramsden (1992, 1998).

- **Purpose of** - Pearson & Battelle for Kids (2012) Hattie & Timperley (2007).

- **Role** Paula et al. (2014) Ramaprasad (1983) Mory (2004)

- **Types and nature** Black and McCormick (2010) Dochy & McDowell (1997) Hounsell (1987).

- **Feedback is problematic** - Shute (2008) Nelson and Schunn (2009) Brookhart (2008) Lew, Alwis, & Schmidt (2010) Schelfhout et al. (2004) Crooks (1988) Gibbs (1999) Scott (2005) QAA, 2001).

- **Market pressures (NSS)** Hunt & Tierney (2006).

Feedback - literature review - themes

- Student/ 'customer' pressures

- Resources constraints/cost Herbert, Joyce, and Hassall (2014)

- Value of feedback – student perceptions – Poulos (2007)
  Helen Pokorny (2010) Anders Jonsson (2012) QAA (2001) Scott (2005)
  Hyatt (2005) Mutch (2003) Randall and Mirador (2003)

- Value of feedback – staff perceptions - Helen Pokorny (2010)
  Baileya and Garnerb (2010)
  - Realists Brown and Glover (2006) MacLellan (2001) Sinclair and
    Cleland (2007)
  - Enthusiasts (too many to mention!)

- Models of feedback process - Hattie and Timperley (2007)

A model of feedback to enhance learning.

Purpose
To reduce discrepancies between current understandings/performance and a desired goal

The discrepancy can be reduced by:
Students
- Increased effort and employment of more effective strategies *OR*
- Abandoning, blurring, or lowering the goals

Teachers
- Providing appropriate challenging and specific goals
- Assisting students to reach them through effective learning strategies and feedback

Effective feedback answers three questions

Where am I going? (the goals)	Feed Up
How am I going?	Feed Back
Where to next?	Feed Forward

Each feedback question works at four levels:

Task level	**Process level**	**Self-regulation level**	**Self level**
How well tasks are understood/performed	The main process needed to understand/perform tasks	Self-monitoring, directing, and regulating of actions	Personal evaluations and affect (usually positive) about the learner

Literature Summary

- Tends to reflect the 'more is better' view – enthusiasts

  But is this sustainable? And in students' best interests?

- Importance and motives of feedback Eckel & King (2004)

- Deliver 'more' by being creative e.g. peer assessment or working harder/longer?

- Models of feedback process
  - The Power of Feedback - Hattie and Timperley (2007)

What is feedback?

- Feedback occurs when outputs of a system are "fed back" as inputs as part of a chain of cause-and-effect that forms a circuit or loop.[2] The system can then be said to "feed back" into itself. The notion of 'cause-and-effect' has to be handled carefully when applied to feedback systems:

- "Simple causal reasoning about a feedback system is difficult because the first system influences the second and second system influences the first, leading to a circular argument. This makes reasoning based upon cause and effect tricky, and it is necessary to analyze the system as a whole." [3]

Definitions not straightforward, different shades of feedback?

- Positive – amplify good outputs
- Negative – reduce below 'standard' outputs
- Tutor-led
  - Individual
  - Group
- Peer
- Self-seeking/reflection
- Comfort information
- Challenging
- Feedback to standard
- Feedforward to adjust standard
- Feed-up to reappraise goals
- Formative
- Summative

But, is more feedback better?
(The resource rationing view)

- Self-assessment & independent learning an outcome?

- Greater access to education - more students in the system?

- Just the way it has to be?

- Does more guidance reduce independent learning?

- What sense do students make of their grades/progress?

- Design for work readiness OR long term employability?

Core aims - University 1 – output focus

- *This course aims to produce high quality graduates with the knowledge, skills and understanding needed for an effective and valued career in the accounting and financial management professions, as well as management or consultancy.*

- *We develop teaching and learning in response to advances in academic theory and the needs of the business community. Our links with industry, professional firms and accounting bodies ensure that the course is relevant, practical and constantly updated.*

- *The course is distinctive in that, alongside the in-depth coverage of accounting and financial management, it seeks to develop knowledge and understanding of the foundational disciplines of management and business in a variety of contexts.*

- *This course is accredited by major professional accounting bodies in the UK and graduates of our course receive exemptions from various examinations of these bodies.*

Core aims - University 2 – input focus

- *This course provides a comprehensive undergraduate education in finance and accounting, coupled with a fully integrated understanding of the theory and practice of management in different organisations. In particular, the degree provides a strong interdisciplinary core of material in accounting and finance theory and practice, focusing upon the modern firm and its financial environment.*

Core aims – CIMA – changing flavour?

- 2010

'…assuring society that those admitted to membership are competent to act as management accountants for entities…. have adequate knowledge, understanding and mastery of the stated body of knowledge and skills… [and] have completed initial professional development and acquired the necessary work-based practical experience and skills (p. 6).

- 2015

'To produce competent and confident management accounting professionals who can guide and lead their organisations to sustainable success.'

Should we guide or should we grade?

Bernie Ecclestone: I banned team radio advice for drivers

- The 83-year-old said drivers needed to be heroes in the wake of concerns they appeared to be puppets for engineers.
- "The drivers are all happy it's gone. They drive the cars, they should know what's wrong and right," he said.

- Would an 83-year-old lecturer get away with saying that?

Context of our study

- Prominence of 'feedback' in NSS scores
- Possible differences in expectations and/or conceptualisations
  - Students
  - Staff
  - HEFCE / Other External Stakeholder(s)
- Alignment with programme aims and module learning outcomes

Research method

- Literature review
- Focus groups
- Students in UK - 12 over years 1-3 in two discussion groups. (transcribed)
- Students in Singapore - 32 in year 3 in 5 discussion groups
- Both groups completed paper version individually and then discussed.
- Staff - two meetings15mins and 60 mins (2nd session transcribed). Self-selecting as interested in teaching and learning.

Student focus groups:
interpretation of NSS questions on assessment & feedback

Group comprised:	
BSc Accounting & Financial Management students 2013/14	
Part A	2
Part B	5
Part C	4
Total	11

NSS questions:

5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.

6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.

7. Feedback on my work has been prompt.

8. I have received detailed comments on my work

9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand

Key themes emerging

1. ## Communication & consistency in marking
   - *e.g. extra reading is rewarded and explained in the marking criteria*
   - *Generic SBE criteria for 1st, 2:1 etc.*
   - *Module specific criteria*
   - *For same marks some modules seem to require more effort*

2. ## Expectations regarding exam feedback
   - *Generic feedback is seen as being of limited use*

   "Like I would rarely/really….look at feedback on our exams and think, oh that helps me, for me to improve. I kind of just use it as a watch out, like if I look at last year's exam there's feedback, I'll use that as a watch out for when I take my year's exam"

Key themes emerging (contd):

3. Coursework feedback variable (tutors & modules)
- Good feedback helped prepare for the exam; comments throughout the work; consistency; how to improve.
- Final year students took it more seriously

4. Fairness in marking & expectations
- If 'excellent' work gets 80% what is the other 20% for?
- Some exams seen as impossible in the time allowed

"And fair enough, they want to push you and see if you can be within the time limit. But if it's impossible to be done then why put it?"

Key themes emerging (contd):

5. Higher Expectations

- Fees
- Placement Year

  "Because I've had an experience in the real world and I know that real, what happens and how accountable you have to be for stuff in the real world and I don't think the university as a whole is on the same page as the business world. And if we're doing a business degree …, then the Business School should also act"

6. Thus, an instrumental approach to feedback?

- More focused in the final year
  "…Whereas I think in first and second you're like, oh well I'm never going to do psychology again, what does it matter?"

Key themes emerging (contd):

7. Understanding the core aims?

- Some students recognised that the AFM programme sets accounting in its business context and that feedback
  - helped in getting a deeper understanding of the programme
  - stops you making the same mistakes in the future
  - critical in moving students from average to higher marks

- BUT others said:
  - Overarching aim of the degree programme never communicated
  - Modules are seen as individual as assessed individually;
    Not put into (business/accounting) context;
    Feedback should show how individual module relates to the real world work/business world, not just doing it to pass exam
    "…I kind of lose out because all I'm doing is I'm revising for an exam and after that I will, I probably will not think about company law ever again"

Key themes emerging (contd):

8. Personal tutoring and the 'view from the bridge'

Suggestion that all feedback should be electronic so that a student can sit with the tutor discuss performance across the programme (students comment) but…

should we focus on developing students skills to do this themselves or

are students simply trying to replicate what they get in school?

General v. subject specialist roles?

Overseas P/Time Students (SG) – Summary

- Reflected general concerns of full time, UK campus, students about wanting more personal guidance from tutors.

- Perhaps through being at work, the students seemed receptive to feedback and knew how to use it.

- Predictably with a physical distance between students and fly-in faculty plus local tutors and two institutional admin systems in play, students were concerned about the timeliness of feedback and standardisation.

- Also, picking up hard copy from the local college was an issue and these students had a preference for emails to their smart phones.

Tutors - two questions for debate:

1. In your opinion, what is the "best feedback" in the world?

2. What is stopping you from giving that feedback in your modules?

Tutors

- Need to manage expectations positively
- <u>Students</u> think the grade is the objective of study
- <u>Staff</u> think that guidance is the objective of study
- Thus, tensions between instrumental v. life-long learning, between work readiness and employability
- Some students genuinely want to see relevance of what they learn in the class room to the job place – is it a good or bad thing??
  - *"with the transferable skills, are the things you can use in the workplace exactly what we'd want to encourage and what we would want to give feedback on.."*
- Students are extrinsically motivated to get a job or good mark (no surprise from other research)

Tutors

- Want students who are
  - self-motivated
  - independent
  - can recognise how generic feedback applies to them

- Do not believe NSS gives the right perception of feedback (at least that will benefit students), but..

- Do not have time/power to bring about changes to NSS scores

- There are different types of feedback for different types of course (write/wrong answer, case study analysis, intellectual debate). Students need to appreciate this when they think about feedback

- Greater role of personal tutors in guiding students understanding of feedback
  - Suggestion in some areas that all feedback should be electronic so that a student can sit with the tutor discuss performance across the programme (students comment) but should we focus on developing students skills to do this themselves or are students trying to replicate what they get in school?

Tutors

- Say they are giving more written feedback

- Acknowledge are peer pressure from other colleagues to NOT give copious feedback

- Accept there are challenges in balancing research and teaching – workload and orientation

- Have difficulty with large modules in giving 'quality' feedback within a 2/3 week time frame

Next stage

- New types of marking and feedback used on SG programmes September 2015 and student feedback being sought.

Questions?