

REPORT ON FEEDBACK FROM THE STUDENT COUNCIL

Introduction

The Student Council at the University of Copenhagen has made the quality of education one of its focus points. The University has also launched a process designed to generate specific proposals for improvements to feedback in teaching.

On the Student Council, we asked ourselves two questions: How does feedback in teaching feature on various study programmes at the University? What do students think about the role of feedback in teaching?

We consulted students in Anthropology, History, Psychology, Mathematics, Public Health, Law and Political Science.

We deliberately consulted students on programmes on which we know that feedback is provided. The questions focused on what difference the feedback makes to the students, both on individual courses and to their studies as a whole.

We have also spoken with a student from Aarhus University to find out about feedback practice outside UCPH.

In the report, we encounter the following types of feedback: individual oral feedback on written assignments, both before and after the final submission, cluster feedback on written assignments, written feedback on submissions, and continuous feedback on case work and student presentations.

Case studies

Political Science:

Students on a bachelor project receive guidance and feedback. The feedback is provided in clusters of 3–4 groups of students who are writing their projects together. The clusters are based on the subject (e.g. democracy) or more randomly assigned, and the teacher is selected according to their interest in the subject.

Written feedback is also given on assignments, followed by cluster

feedback (e.g. during the comparative politics course).

Cluster feedback sessions can involve the students writing a quick exercise about the project, or them submitting their thoughts about the problem to the teacher before classes. The groups present their written products to each other, and the teacher provides feedback. Other students in the cluster then provide feedback based on the presentation. Finally, the teacher provides overall feedback and answers questions.

The students say that the level of introduction to this method of working has varied greatly. Some have been introduced to forms for feedback, others have been given instructions on how to receive feedback from others. Peer feedback (i.e. from student to student) is of varying quality, but exercise helps them improve.

It can be difficult, especially on the bachelor project, if the teacher does not possess specific knowledge of the subject about which the group is writing. The feedback needs to be substantial and academic, not just related to the process.

Cluster feedback is seen as a good supplement to individual feedback, but as the students get better both at the specific subject and on the course as a whole, individual feedback becomes more important.

Law (bachelor):

At the start of the classes, the teacher reviews legal frameworks and theory. Each group of students studies its own case. The teacher provides feedback either as they go along or afterwards. In other words, the feedback is both summative and sometimes formative. Either during the process or once all of the cases have been reviewed, the teacher draws links between the syllabus for the whole course and the day's subject matter.

It is only on compulsory courses that the feedback is integrated and systematic. Feedback on the elective courses is provided in a less systematic way, and there is no group work.

When it is not an integral part of a course, less thought seems to be put into the feedback.

The students find out whether they are doing things right or wrong, and whether their interpretation and understanding of practice is correct. This also leads them to think more closely about the law in relation to casework.

The students spend more time on their studies. The compulsory take-home assignments help keep students motivated, because the preparation work involves more than just reading.

Applying the law improves understanding. If students are left to read on their own, misunderstandings may occur, which must be corrected in interaction between the teacher and the student. In this way, the students have a better sense of whether they are ready to sit the exam.

Mathematics:

The Department of Mathematics provides both written and oral feedback on short voluntary submissions and on one or two major assignments per course.

Instructors inform the students what is right and wrong in the assignment, and make more formative and general comments, e.g. suggesting a different focus or approach. A week later, the students have the opportunity to receive oral feedback during the breaks between exercise classes. There is close contact between students on different levels of the study programme, which means that younger students are quite comfortable consulting the student instructors. The relationship between students and instructors is friendly and informal.

Some courses allow students to resubmit assignments. Some compulsory assignments are so difficult that many students resubmit them.

The instructors' abilities to provide feedback vary. Although communication skills are part of the set of competencies that instructors must possess, no provision is made for skills development.

The written and oral feedback, and in particular the resubmission option, means that the students feel ready for the exam, because they

have a good idea of the stage they are at with their studies and can tailor their exam preparation accordingly.

They learn to distinguish between attaining a genuine understanding of the subject and merely getting by.

Anthropology:

Portfolio exams are common in the Department of Anthropology. Some courses include between three and five assignments, at least one of which must be written. The other assignments are submitted in the form of posters, video clips, presentations, etc. For example, a student may have to submit three separate assignments during the semester. Following submission, the student attends a feedback session with a formative focus. At the end of the semester, all three assignments are resubmitted at once, improved by the feedback received earlier in the semester.

The continuous assessment works so well that it can replace the need for feedback on exam assignments after they have been graded.

The portfolio exam means students make the most of the semester, because they can continuously adjust their work in the light of formative and personal feedback.

Psychology:

Psychology students receive oral feedback on their exam submissions. Each student spends ten minutes with the teacher who marked the assignment. All students are asked to attend at the same time, but they go in one by one. In practice, this means that they may end up waiting for feedback for up to 90 minutes.

The students also say that very few classes involve interaction with the academic staff.

There is no standard way of providing feedback, nor do the teachers all put in the same amount of preparation.

Feedback provides the students with a better understanding of what they have done right and wrong, albeit in retrospect. However, it also provides knowledge that they can use on other courses, e.g. on how

to structure an academic assignment.

Feedback gives them a better overview of the course content and improves their ability to see the bigger picture on any future courses.

It also gives the students a better idea of what to expect in the exam.

Public Health Science:

The Department of Public Health Science is in the process of introducing a mentoring scheme for its master's study programme. The system is based on groups of four students, who meet with the teacher twice per semester. The teacher provides the group with continuous feedback on the students' work and academic understanding. The students in the group also critique each other's work, facilitated by the teacher. The groups are based on shared academic interests, so that both the students and the teacher possess in-depth knowledge of the areas with which the group is working.

Public Health Science is the only study programme to date that has adopted the mentoring scheme. Establishing mentoring schemes for bachelor and master's students is not expected to place any great burden on teachers, as much of their current feedback work would be rendered redundant if the dialogue were made more continuous.

Continuous formative and personal feedback throughout the semester means that the students are able to tailor their day-to-day work to the syllabus and classes, and thereby improve their academic competencies.

History:

The Department of History has only recently introduced portfolio exams, on the fourth semester of the methodology course in Cultural History. This form of exam is structured in such a way that the student writes three or four assignments over the semester. After each assignment, the student receives formative written feedback and is offered the opportunity to ask questions. The student then reworks the individual assignment, and then resubmits all of the assignments at once at the end of the semester. This means that the exam consists of

an assignment that has undergone a thorough process of revision. Once again, the teacher and examiner provide feedback on all of the assignments.

Continuous feedback on the same product leads to good results for the students, and significantly improves their ability to work with academic assignments later in the study programme.

This form of exam and feedback can reduce the amount of feedback needed after submission, as both the students and the teachers have far better insight into the frameworks for the assignment.

Aarhus University, Biology:

During the first semester, groups of two or three students, along with a supervisor, follow an ongoing research project. A written report with feedback and guidance from the teacher is then drawn up. The course culminates with a symposium, at which the report is presented orally, the teachers provide feedback and the students give feedback to each other.

The scheme is incredibly popular.

Conclusion

The study found great diversity in how feedback was incorporated into teaching. For some students, feedback was an integrated part of their studies, while for others it was only ever made available after exams and written assignments.

All the students felt that the feedback they received during their studies had a positive effect. However, there was a difference in the perceived benefits of the feedback, and this was primarily attributed to the teacher(s) concerned. The teachers' preparation, academic knowledge of the specific subject and pedagogical skills were identified as factors that influenced how much the students gained from the feedback.

It was also deemed important that feedback is standard practice, and not something that students must seek out for themselves. Students had more respect for their teachers and for the feedback they received

when the interaction was structured, and not random.

Feedback also had great impact on how much energy the students expended on preparation for classes, and whether they felt that they were developing academically, both during the individual course concerned and throughout their study programmes as a whole.

Continuous feedback with multiple submissions or other products that led to an exam were highlighted as particularly effective ways of stimulating academic development and giving students confidence in the run-up to exams.