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Formative Assessment Feedback Survey Report – Spring 2024

# HSU’s Formative Assessment Feedback Survey

## Executive Summary

Formative Assessment Feedback (FAF) is a key pedagogical intervention which, when used consistently and correctly (by both tutors and students), can be one of the most powerful tools available to elevate a student’s learning experience and outcomes (Nichol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2004; Yorke, 2003; Irons, 2007). However, while the use of FAF in Higher Education is growing rapidly, its implementation is often inconsistent both in quality and coverage (Gedye 2010).

* Our survey of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences students, carried out in February and March of this year, found that where formative feedback is provided it is valued. Students consider it to have a clear impact on their understanding of the subject and the quality of their work.
* However positive sentiment is tempered by a feeling that FAF is often brief and lacking detail, with staff workloads leading to a ‘generalised’ cut and paste approach in some cases.
* Students also desired greater opportunity to discuss formative feedback directly with tutors either in groups sessions or one-to-one.
* Communication of timescales for feedback, and that these then be met, was pointed to as a clear area for improvement, as well as ensuring students are notified when feedback is released, and that said feedback be easily accessible.
* Respondents also asked for greater consideration of how formative feedback opportunities are impacted by mandatory placement blocks and that on-line or asynchronous delivery could be used to overcome these hurdles.

We recommend the SHU [guidance for staff on the preparation of FAF](https://blog.shu.ac.uk/teachingdelivery/delivery-principles-2021-22/assessing/#formative) be expanded to provide more explicit guidance to staff on how to meet these student needs in the face of ever more challenging workloads.

## Background

HSU’s Formative Assessment Feedback Survey was open between 17th February and 1st March 2024 and distributed to all Health, Wellbeing and Life Sciences students (except for final year undergrads, so as to compete with NSS) and received 179 responses. Respondents were asked their experiences of receiving formative feedback whilst studying at Hallam, how useful they found it, and what could be done to improve it, amongst other things. The full survey is available in Appendix A.

## Demographics

Respondents were asked to provide their level of study and course. We have aggregated the latter into Departments and the demographic split is displayed in the below tables.

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| **Table 1** |
| **Level of Study** | **Count of Responses** |
| A foundation degree student | 9 |
| An undergraduate first year student | 50 |
| An undergraduate middle year student | 45 |
| An undergraduate final year student | 2 |
| A postgraduate taught student | 67 |
| Other | 6 |
| **Grand Total** | **179** |

Postgraduate taught students were the most represented level of study, followed by First-Year undergraduates and then Middle-year undergraduates.

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| **Table 2** |
| **Row Labels** | **Count of Course Grouping** |
| **AHP** | **70** |
| Art Psychotherapy | 7 |
| Dietetics | 1 |
| Occupational Therapy | 11 |
| Operating Department Practice | 3 |
| Paramedic Science  | 5 |
| Physiotherapy  | 31 |
| Radiography | 12 |
| **Biosci & Chem** | **24** |
| Biomedical science  | 16 |
| Pharmacology | 8 |
| **N&M** | **61** |
| Adult Nursing | 25 |
| Advanced Clinical Practice  | 8 |
| Child Nursing | 9 |
| Mental health nursing  | 14 |
| Midwifery | 5 |
| **Sport & Physical Activity** | **11** |
| Sport Management  | 4 |
| Sport Science | 7 |
| **SW,SC&C** | **13** |
| Social Work/Social Care | 13 |
| **Grand Total** | **179** |

Allied Health and Nursing and Midwifery were the most represented departments, unsurprisingly given their status as the largest departments in the college. And by further breaking responses down into course grouping we can see nursing courses (especially Adult Nursing) and Physiotherapy remain the largest response cohorts.

## Findings

### Receipt of Formative Feedback

As Figures 1 & 2 indicate, the use of formative assessment feedback (FAF) is consistently high, with around 86% of all respondents declaring having received FAF during their time at Sheffield Hallam. Rates were lowest among foundation year and PGT students.

Figure 1: Receipt of formative assessment feedback by level of study (n=179)

By department, Allied Health Professions (AHP) and Social Work, Social Care and Community Studies (SWSC&CS) students reported the highest use of FAF at 93% and 100% respectively. Nursing & Midwifery (N&M) reported the lowest level of use at 79%.

Figure 2: Receipt of formative assessment feedback by department (n=179)

Of those students how reported not having received any FAF, 52% said they had not been offered the option at all. The remainder advised that while they had been offered it, they chose not to submit work for review either due to time constraints or not seeing the value.

### Quality of Feedback

Of those who did receive FAF, 85% found the feedback to be either somewhat, very or extremely useful, with just 15% finding it not so or not at all useful. However, as **figures 3 & 4** show, strength of positive sentiment varied significantly across departments and level of study.

Figure 3: Perceived quality of Formative feedback by department. N/As removed. (n=132)

Allied Health, Biochem and N&M showed the highest levels of most positive sentiment, while almost 80% of the admittedly small number of Sports & Physical Activity student respondents had found their feedback to be very useful.

Figure 4: Perceived quality of formative feedback by level of study. NAs removed. (n=132)

Post-grad taught and first year undergrads, the two largest respondent groups by level of study, had very similar levels of positive sentiment at 53% & 59% respectively. The next largest group, middle year undergrads, were considerably less positive with just 35% finding the feedback they’d received either very or extremely useful.

### Impact

When asked if the formative feedback they’d received had improved their understanding of the subject and quality of work, a similar pattern emerges. Generally, respondents were very positive, with 81% saying it had improved their understand and quality of work.

As **figures 5 & 6** show, negative sentiment for this question closely mirrors that for the previous one, across nearly all departments and levels of study. This is perhaps intuitive, as students are more likely to describe a teaching intervention as useful if they feel it has improved their understanding of the subject matter.

The only significant exception to this is the dept of Nursing & Midwifery, whose respondents were 13 percentage points less likely to answer positively to the question about improved understanding than they were about the quality of the feedback they’d received. This may suggest in that department a disconnect between the substance and relevance of some formative assessment tasks and the wider course content.

Figure 5: Perceived improvements derived from formative assessment feedback, by department (n=132)

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Figure 6: Perceived improvements derived from formative assessment feedback, by department (n=132)

We then asked students who’d answered negatively, why the feedback had not improved their understanding or quality of work. The significant themes are shown in Table 3.

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| **Table 3: Has the formative assessment feedback you have received improved your quality of work and understanding of the subject? If not, why?** |
| **Themes** | **Count** |
| Comments weren't helpful/ were vague/ lack detail/ lack deeper explanations | 16 |
| Feedback feels inconsistent or subjective | 7 |
| Word caps not long enough | 2 |
| Assignment briefs being vague | 2 |
| Tutors seem to lack knowledge | 2 |
| Comments feel cut & pasted /not bespoke | 2 |
| Lacked reference to basic skills (eg referencing) | 1 |
| Seems to have no impact on grades | 1 |
| Doesn’t relate to what has been taught /feels like new info | 1 |

There two most significant themes pointed, firstly, to a lack of detail and specificity in the feedback comments. Respondents felt comments were often far too brief to provide real insight and lacked specific examples or areas to work on.

“Multiple times have received a “?” With no context or one word answers that really don’t say anything are just filler words to put something down. Have also once got feedback saying “you have gone over word count” when they said you can go over, but we’ll only mark the first 150 words. Most of the time it’s not constructive at all.”

Secondly, students pointed to a lack of consistency, with FAF varying significantly between lecturers, and standards and expectations varying significantly between formative and summative assessments.

“When discussing results and feedback with other students, advice is very inconsistent with what's expected and not expected in the feedback, making the marking of assessment seem very subjective of the marker which I don't think is fair, I don't want to receive a grade based my markers mood that day and if they decide to nitpick.”

### Improvements

Respondents were next asked how the delivery of FAF could be improved going forwards. As **table 4** indicates, the largest theme spoke of students’ desire for greater levels of detail in the feedback itself. The use of specific examples of ‘good practice' and more direction in general. This was requested even for formatively assess work of a good quality, where feedback is often restricted to a couple of lines.

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| **Table 4: How do you think the delivery of formative assessment feedback on your course could be improved?** |
| **Themes** | **Count** |
| More areas for improvement or specific examples /solutions, even for strong work | 23 |
| Formative feedback is already good/ no improvement required | 12 |
| Better standardization /more consistency | 10 |
| More bespoke, less copy & pasted feedback | 8 |
| Link in with AA's /provide 1:1 sessions | 7 |
| Longer word caps | 5 |
| Provide a rubric for formative writing assessment | 4 |
| Audio files of recorded verbal feedback | 2 |
| Classmates to provide peer feedback | 1 |
| Review how FAF works in group modules | 1 |
| Markers should engage with student notes on work | 1 |
| Should be more relevant to the final /summative assessment | 1 |

“More in-depth feedback, not one word comments. […] one comment on an A4 (sic) doesn’t say much about how correct or incorrect it is. If it’s wrong please highlight and explain so I can use that to ensure I don’t make similar mistakes in future.”

“Give more ways to improve the work. I found that if I scored over 60% I was given very few ways to improve.”

This theme points to time constraints we know staff are often under when preparing feedback of all kinds, and we feel it is likely that formative feedback suffers even more from this than summative, given the more explicit expectations and norms around the latter.

A request for more consistency and standardisation between markers again came through strongly, with some students asking for rubrics for formative assessments. This once again suggests a possible disconnect between the content and format of formative and summative assessment in some instances, as one would expect formative assessment to be indicative of the summative assessment on the course and as such would use the same rubric.

Another strong overarching theme generated from the data was a desire for more tailored and individualised feedback and delivery. Be it with written feedback, where some students felt comments were often copied and pasted and bore little relation to their work, or with more 1:1 sessions with tutors were the work and feedback could be discussed in greater detail. Other suggestions included the looping in of Academic Advisors (AAs) to aid delivery of this, and the use of audio files of feedback to help reduce workloads for staff.

“[I’d like to] have personalised plans made with AA tutors to help develop weaknesses. Can be tricky developing them by yourself.”

“This could be improved through one to on sessions with the student as every student learns at their own pace.”

Finally, respondents were asked how the organisation and communication of FAF opportunities could be improved. The generated themes are shown in **table 5**. While several mirror those derived from the previous question (e.g. a desire from greater detail, consistency, and an opportunity to discuss FAF with tutors and AAs), the predominant theme was around timescales for feedback;

* ensuring that these timescales were communicated clearly to students,
* that these expectations were then met on time,
* and that students were notified promptly when the feedback was released.

On this latter point, students were ambivalent as to how FAF should be released, either by email or via Blackboard, just that the delivery method should be consistent.

“It would be helpful if it had a notification when the feedback has been completed, we have to check daily to see if the lecturer submitted FB has returned.”

“Dates that feedback will be received could be better communicated; sometimes I don't realize I have had work back until a few days later.”

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| **Table 5: How could the organisation and communication of formative assessment feedback opportunities at Sheffield Hallam University be improved?** |
| **Theme** | **Count** |
| Ensure it is delivered on time /promptly | 18 |
| Make it more in-depth /less vague / less general | 13 |
| Communication on timescales and when feedback is released | 10 |
| Consistency, both in approach and offer to all students | 10 |
| Formative feedback is already good | 9 |
| Link in with AA's /provide 1:1 sessions | 9 |
| Easily accessible /available via blackboard or email | 7 |
| Joint feedback sessions to cover common weaknesses | 5 |
| Including written feedback | 4 |
| Provide a rubric | 3 |
| Online feedback sessions to help fit round placements | 3 |
| Feedback sessions not to clash with placement dates | 2 |
| Make it constructive / less critical | 2 |
| More of it! | 2 |
| Raise student awareness of what Formative Assessment Feedback is | 1 |

Another common theme worth commenting on was the desire that placements should not interfere with the submission and delivery of FAF. Respondents complained feedback sessions sometimes clashed with placement dates, or that FAF was delivered just prior to placement giving little in-class time to act of suggested improvements prior to their summative assessment.

“Giving enough time between formative assessments and the assessment deadline to give time to improve and not giving formative results [when] we are gone on placement.”

This may help explain the somewhat more negative sentiment toward the effectiveness of FAF found in N&M students (see **figure 5**).

One possible solution to this mooted by students was to conduct on-line feedback sessions that could be attended around placement or watched back asynchronously.

“Have an online lecture that goes over common feedback given in detail. Should be online as there are too many lessons in uni especially when at placement with specific hours you can work.”

# References

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# Appendices

## Appendix A – Formative Assessment Feedback Survey

Thank you for taking part in this survey!

Formative assessment feedback is an important aspect of higher education, and the way students learn and progress throughout their university courses. But we know it is used inconsistently between courses and departments, meaning some students potentially miss out on this valuable resource. Please answer these quick questions to let us know what you think of the formative feedback provided on your course and help us create real change:

Your comments may also be used by Hallam Students' Union to support its wider research into the student experience. If you have any questions about this survey, please email usresearch@shu.ac.uk.

This survey is completely anonymous.

\* 1. Are you currently (Level of Study)

\* 2. What course are you currently studying? (e.g. "Adult Nursing")

\* 3. Have you received any formative assessment feedback during your studies at Hallam

University?

* Yes
* No

\* 4. How would you rate the quality of the formative assessment feedback you have received

on your course?

* Not at all useful
* Not so useful
* Somewhat useful
* Very useful
* Extremely useful

If 'No' please explain (text box)

\* 5. Has the formative assessment feedback you have received improved your quality of work

and understanding of the subject?

* Yes
* No

6. How do you think the delivery of formative assessment feedback on your course could be

improved? (text box)

[From 3. – ‘No’] \* 7. Were you offered an opportunity to receive formative assessment feedback?

* Yes
* No

If 'Yes', please explain why you did not receive it? (text box)

8. How could the organisation and communication of formative assessment feedback

opportunities at Sheffield Hallam University be improved? (text box)