

B3: Formative Feedback

APP PAR Project Cycle 3 2021-2022

[Appendix 1: Staff survey questions](#)

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1. Background information		
Topic	<i>The impact of formative feedback on students with SEMH/neurodiverse conditions.</i>	
Strand	A: Black British perspectives	
	B: Disability/Mental Health perspectives	x
Specific research question	<i>How do students and supervisors understand formative feedback in a supervision context and what do they consider to be helpful and unhelpful practices in terms of supporting students' mental health and academic performance?</i>	
Student co-researchers	Olivia Lavigne, HSPS/Management Studies, 4th year,	
	Mithiran Ravindran, English, 2nd year,	
	Johanna Newnham, Education, 3rd year,	

2. Executive summary
<p>This project intends to identify what undergraduate students and undergraduate supervisors perceive to be helpful modes of formative feedback to support students' mental health and academic performance. Staff and student responses to online surveys as well as data from a student focus group informed the findings and recommendations described in this report. Overall, formative feedback was perceived as supportive for academic performance when it was detailed, actionable, and tailored feedback that boosts students' motivation. Mental health of students was perceived to be related to students' academic performance, and therefore the role of feedback was deemed to be important to support students' overall wellbeing and engagement with supervisions. While both students and staff generally agreed on what constituted important forms of feedback, there were discrepancies in the perceived beneficial role of peer feedback within and outside of supervisions. Most student and staff respondents disclosed that additional guidance, resources, and training opportunities on how to utilise feedback effectively/how to give effective feedback would be beneficial.</p>

3. Rationale

Much of the learning at Cambridge is achieved through undergraduate supervisions which provides a space for formative feedback on submitted work. These are carried out in small groups or 1-on-1 and aim to deepen understanding of the course and make sure that essential knowledge is acquired, as well as prepare students for their summative evaluations. These are therefore crucial to students' academic performance. Due to the large volume of work submitted for these supervisions, the time spent on it, the feedback received and its importance in the learning process, these supervisions are also important for student mental health (MH). However, the experiences of feedback in supervisions seems to be very variable, with varying degrees of accommodation for students with MH conditions (Gaston and Duschinsky, 2020). Given that students and supervisors are likely to benefit from understanding each others' expectations, it is important for the role of formative feedback to be understood by both groups, specifically since it offers opportunities to tackle the awarding gap experienced by students with mental health conditions at Cambridge (BIT, 2020).

Understanding what students and supervisors value in terms of feedback and identifying potential gaps in this is essential to making supervision feedback more helpful to students in terms of mental health and performance. This involves identifying what each group considers to be feedback, how supervisors take into account its impact from an academic and MH standpoint, and how well students are able to utilise this feedback. Insights into these perceptions and potential discrepancies would help put in place systems to accommodate for students with MH conditions, improve feedback disclosure and use, as well as work towards closing the awarding gap for students with MH conditions.

References

- Business Information Team (2020). Analysis of student characteristics and attainment outcomes at the University of Cambridge. Retrieved from https://www.cao.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.cao.cam.ac.uk/files/attainment_outcomes.pdf.
- Gaston, A., & Duschinsky, R. (2020). Students' experiences of the Cambridge supervision system: performance, pedagogy and power. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(8), 1218-1234.

4. Contextual information (literature review)

Formative feedback involves guiding and direct student learning to improve performance and engagement with the academic task and/or field. A formative assessment is not graded and allows students to develop their knowledge and strategies in view of their summative assessments (e.g., exams, coursework...) (Leighton & Bustos Gómez, 2018). For this reason, the feedback's aim is to "facilitate higher cognitive thinking (or "deep learning") and therefore improvement of one or more aspects of a student's education; for example, of understanding, ability, skills, or performance" (Francis et al., 2019, p. 468). As a result, its importance has become a central concern for students and staff alike in terms of teaching satisfaction and performance (Ferguson, 2011; Lowe & Shaw, 2019). This is especially true with the implementation of the NSS which has shown that feedback is scoring low in student satisfaction (Lowe & Shaw, 2019). Thus, it has been the focus of extensive research to establish what makes for the best feedback and to determine gaps in expectations surrounding feedback between students and staff which might explain dissatisfaction.

The University of Cambridge's supervision system provides a space for formative feedback through multiple modalities, including facilitating peer learning, detailed feedback on submitted tasks, as well as oral discussions.

Good formative feedback and discrepancies in definition:

The extant literature on good feedback practices highlights that issues can arise with feedback delivery and uptake. Indeed, not only is the content, timing, and format of the feedback essential, but also how it is received by students (Lowe & Shaw, 2019; Winstone et al., 2017). Consistently, students point out that, to be effective, feedback should be balanced in terms of positive and negative elements, timely, and preferably handed back face-to-face in a group setting (Ferguson, 2011; Lowe & Shaw, 2019). Content was considered more important by students than the mode of delivery. Explicit association of formative feedback with marking criteria was not rated particularly highly by students. This exemplifies differences in expectations: academic staff seem to conceptualise academic success more narrowly than their students, who value the learning experience (Naylor et al., 2021), while academic staff emphasise more on students' engagement and enthusiasm.

Formative feedback as dialogue:

Feedback conceptualised as a dialogue extends beyond it being a static event which can be absorbed by the receiver. A new focus on the dynamic and relational aspects of feedback has revealed that factors separate from the feedback quality itself can increase the effectiveness of feedback. Naylor et al. (2021) found that students tend to value closer relations and dialogue with their professors and that they are able to receive feedback more effectively in circumstances where they have agency (Francis et al., 2019). When students can discuss feedback and request clarifications, they are more satisfied and perform better (Francis et al., 2019). Thus, relational aspects of feedback are crucial. Implementing small practices such as discussing mistakes (Leighton & Bustos Gómez, 2018) to build trust between academics and students can have positive effects on student well-being and reception of feedback. "Reconceptualising feedback as a dialogic and relational activity", where "cognitive, social-affective and structural dimensions" are at play seems to lead to better long-term effects on learning and well-being for staff and students and goes beyond static perceptions of quality feedback. While it is worth acknowledging that this is a more time-consuming practice, this may bridge the gap between performance and satisfaction for both staff and students.

Conclusion:

The ties between student well-being, performance, and feedback have become increasingly apparent in the extant literature on teaching and learning practices. Findings further show that where staff pursue collaborative feedback practices, these have both short-term and long-term benefits for students, helping them identify sources of confusion and develop metacognitive skills respectively (Leighton & Bustos Gómez, 2018). Thus, despite Cambridge's slightly different academic structure, establishing best practices for formal and informal feedback is important to all involved as there is an increased emphasis on formative assessment over the course of the academic year.

This project seeks to explore the perceptions of formative feedback from both undergraduates and undergraduate supervisors, with a particular emphasis on the role of feedback on supporting academic performance as well as student mental health.

References:

1. Ajjawi, R., & Boud, D. (2018). Examining the nature and effects of feedback dialogue. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(7), 1106–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1434128>
2. Ferguson, P. (2011). Student perceptions of quality feedback in teacher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 36(1), 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930903197883>

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7. Naylor, R., Bird, F. L., & Butler, N. E. (2021). Academic expectations among university students and staff: Addressing the role of psychological contracts and social norms. *Higher Education*, 82(5), 847–863. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00668-2>
8. Winstone, N. E., Nash, R. A., Rowntree, J., & Parker, M. (2017). ‘It’d be useful, but I wouldn’t use it’: Barriers to university students’ feedback seeking and recipience. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(11), 2026–2041. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.11300>

5. What do you hope to achieve with this qualitative research project?

This project aims to quantify how much students feel about the role of supervision feedback on their academic performance and mental health, as well as whether supervisors take this into account within their teaching practice. We expect that the degree to which they are considered important will be high. Then, its aim is to identify what students and supervisors consider to be best practice in terms of the nature, content and characteristic of the feedback, highlight areas of discrepancy in this and attempt to narrow this gap. This will be focused particularly on students with MH conditions and how feedback practice can be adapted to help narrow the performance gap. We expect to find that students value certain aspects of feedback more highly than supervisors. Finally, its aim is evaluative in the sense that it wishes to identify the strong points of the current feedback system and highlight key areas in which it can be improved, notably through the focus group and supervisor feedback. This would overall improve feedback processes, students’ ability to receive feedback and use it to narrow the gap, as well as lead to higher supervisor satisfaction.

6. Methods: generation of evidence

Online surveys

Two online surveys were developed on Qualtrics to be circulated to both staff and undergraduate students at Cambridge. The survey questions were similar and primarily modified to be student or staff-facing. The surveys had open-ending, multiple choice, and ranking-based questions. None of the questions were compulsory. For both staff and student surveys, participants had access to the participant information sheet and had to give their consent before responding to the questions. Those who did not consent were led to the end of the survey and thanked for their time and consideration.

Student survey: We circulated a survey to all undergraduate students with SEMH (Socio-Emotional and Mental Health conditions) and neurodiverse conditions to collect information about their experiences of receiving, and preferences for, different types of formative feedback. It was dispersed through various social media platforms and the Disability Resource Centre's mailing list.

Staff survey: The staff online survey was circulated by email to mailing lists of three cohorts (2019 - 2021, 2020-2021, 2021- 2022): Undergraduate Supervisor Training, PGCTLHE, Teaching Associates Programme. This was intended to target both new and more experienced supervisors.

All identifiable information from the online surveys were removed by staff members of the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL) before sharing the dataset with the student researchers (authors of this report). Identifiable information, e.g., email addresses were sought primarily for CCTL staff to contact any respondent in case of any concerns about mental health and related disclosures. Final datasets were shared with student researchers on Excel where the analysis was conducted.

Student focus group:

The student survey concluded with the opportunity for participants to express their interest in follow-up discussions via a focus group at a later date. One focus group with 3 participants was conducted using semi-structured questions in April 2022.

The focus group was conducted by two student researchers and intended to provide further nuance to the student perspectives on what feedback practices are most conducive to good mental health and academic performance, why, and what gets in the way of these desired outcomes. The focus group was revelatory, albeit the small sample, particularly to showcase the diversity of experiences and perceptions of feedback.

7. Small project research findings

I. Demographics

Overall, 67 student survey responses were taken into consideration for this research. Of these, 25 were STEM students, 12 were social sciences students and 30 were Arts/Humanities students. 51% of the

students reported having an official diagnosis (with one or more mental health conditions), and 36% of the students had officially declared their mental health condition(s) to the university. 66% of the students were in first and second year (33% each).

Additionally, 20 supervisor survey responses were considered for this project. Of these, 6 supervised STEM students, 5 supervised social sciences students and 9 supervised Arts/Humanities students. Most of the supervisors had been supervising for less than a year (40%), followed by 1 - 3 years of experience (35%). These allowed us to analyse responses for each subject area separately to identify any potential differences between groups while noticing overall trends.

II. Alignment and discrepancies in feedback meaning and importance

Both students and staff were asked about what they thought feedback meant in the supervision context. The student and supervisor survey responses showed that formative feedback was understood in mostly the same way across groups and across subject areas. When asked what constituted to them as formative feedback, written feedback on the task, oral feedback about engagement with the readings/course, CamCORS reports, and oral feedback on the submitted work were reported by most staff and student participants. Students reported encountering oral feedback about a written task/problem sheet/exam paper, end of term CamCORS report, and written feedback. Supervisors also rated these as approaches they were most likely to use in their supervisory practice.

“Primarily feedback is written or oral comments aimed to help the students improve their work or relevant skills to the standard expected. In my course supervisors are given essentially no guidance on what standards the students are supposed to be at so feedback is also anything to improve their skills or understanding, regardless of their current level. Depending on the students it could also include conversations on other academic skills, such as task prioritisation, time management etc.”
(Staff, STEM)

*“(1) Written and verbal feedback on essays
(2) Supervision reports at the end of every term
(3) Verbal/informal feedback during supervision discussions”* (Student, Arts/Humanities)

Both students and supervisors rated ‘feedback on thinking skills (argumentation, evaluation, ideas explored, problem solving, analysis, interpretation etc) as the most important form of supervision. However, students rated ‘feedback on writing skills (structure and organisation of work, style, spelling, grammar, referencing etc) as the least important, supervisors rated this as the second most important form of feedback. Overall, students appeared to rate feedback on thinking skills, comprehension (grasp of theory, concept application), and discussion of solutions more important.

Feedback approaches to support academic performance, engagement, and interest

In terms of academic performance, engagement, and interest, students and staff both rated the following as the the top three feedback approaches (see Figures 1 and 2)

- Guidance on exam technique
- Written feedback on individual pieces of work submitted for supervision
- Oral discussions about the task

Overall across subjects, there seems to be consensus among students for some types of feedback that they value highly or did not value to support their academic interests and performance. Albeit the small group sizes, some types of feedback were the source of more contention both among students and among supervisors. Interestingly, students reported 'supervisor facilitated peer feedback' as having the lowest use to support their academic performance, engagement, and interest. Students seemed to believe that 'supervisor facilitated peer feedback' was not particularly important and that discussions about personal skills were quite important. This trend was strongest within the Arts students. Additionally, 'measurement of work against a marking criteria (i.e., assessment grid)' was rated as highly and extremely useful by students, but mostly rated as not at all or slightly useful by supervisors. Estimated marks and numerical marks seemed to elicit very personal responses from students in all fields, with a tendency in social sciences and STEMM to be in favour of them.

"she created a tick grid of the marking criteria and then wrote yes or no next to each point whether my essay had met it" (Student, Social Sciences)

"In written feedback, spending the majority of the feedback critiquing my work and offering suggestions for improvement (I'd rather them spend the limited marking time that they have on helping me improve rather than writing out loads of praise since this doesn't help make me better). However, I'd like some comments on what I've done well so that I know to repeat this in future work and not change it" (Student, Arts/Humanities)

"When designing questions (E.g. for essays) set clear expectations of what is expected. Students in my experience find this extremely useful in the early days. Do not take a didactic approach all the time. Involve them in the process of providing feedback. Prompting students to identify their own mistake is often better than just telling them that they're wrong." (Supervisor, STEMM)

Interestingly, in the student focus group, numeric mark and/or estimated grades were reported as having an impact on alleviating academic concerns and being more confident in where they were situated in their peer group. For a student with a mental health condition, who was already having difficulties with navigating the workload and their wellbeing, an estimated grade helped to understand where they currently stood stating "receiving a rubbish grade feels horrible, but it is still much better to get the grade rather than the feedback like "you didn't really understand the question". Conversely, others felt that numeric marks and estimated grades put more pressure on them and found that grades were often a poor reflection of their performance.

Overall, there was a general agreement that CamCORS reports were useful when they were meaningful, personalised, constructive, and progress-oriented rather than impersonal and clearly written for the DoS (rather than the student).

"It depends a lot on supervisors, some clearly copy and paste feedback eg. one who wrong "the student has done well..." same message for every NatSci in my friendship group. and some are notorious for harsh, unconstructive feedback. however an involved, good supervisor report can both be pleasant to read, and provide useful advice for the future exams." (Student, STEMM)

"Obviously CamCORS reports offer way less feedback than the accumulation of all the feedback from over the term, but I find my reports useful because they point out what my supervisors think are the MAIN point(s) of improvement for me. They also give me a big confidence boost because

by the end of term I'm very exhausted but my supervisors say nice and encouraging things and this gets me motivated for the next term.” (Student, Arts/Humanities)

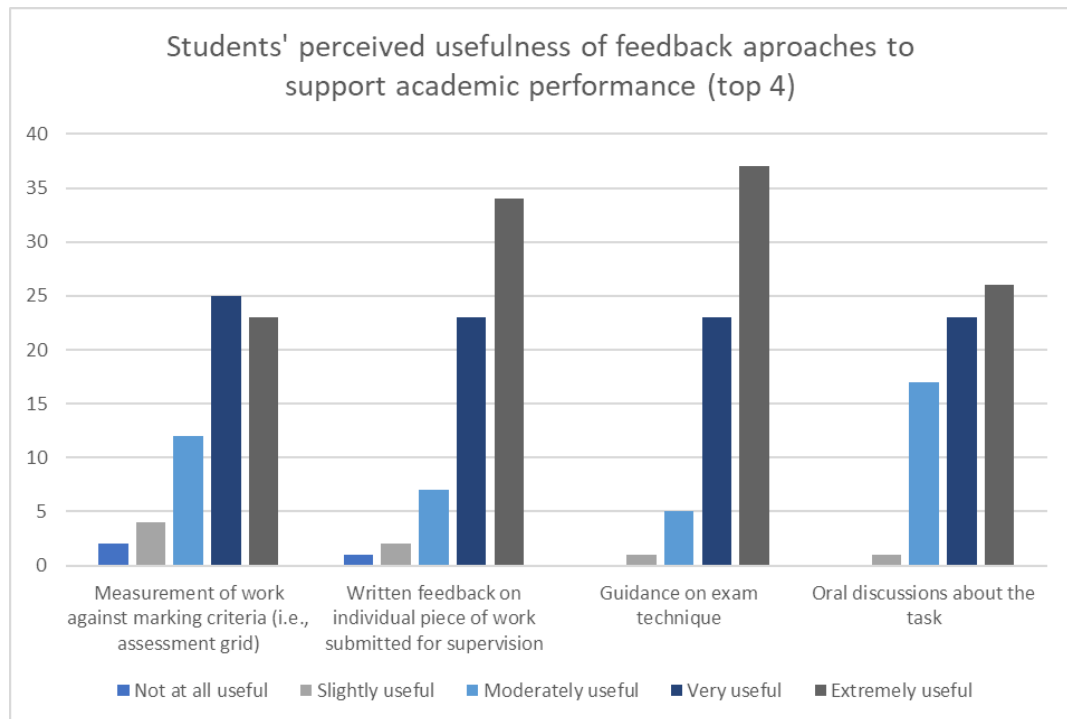


Figure 1: Students' perceptions of feedback approaches that are useful to support their academic performance, interest and engagement.

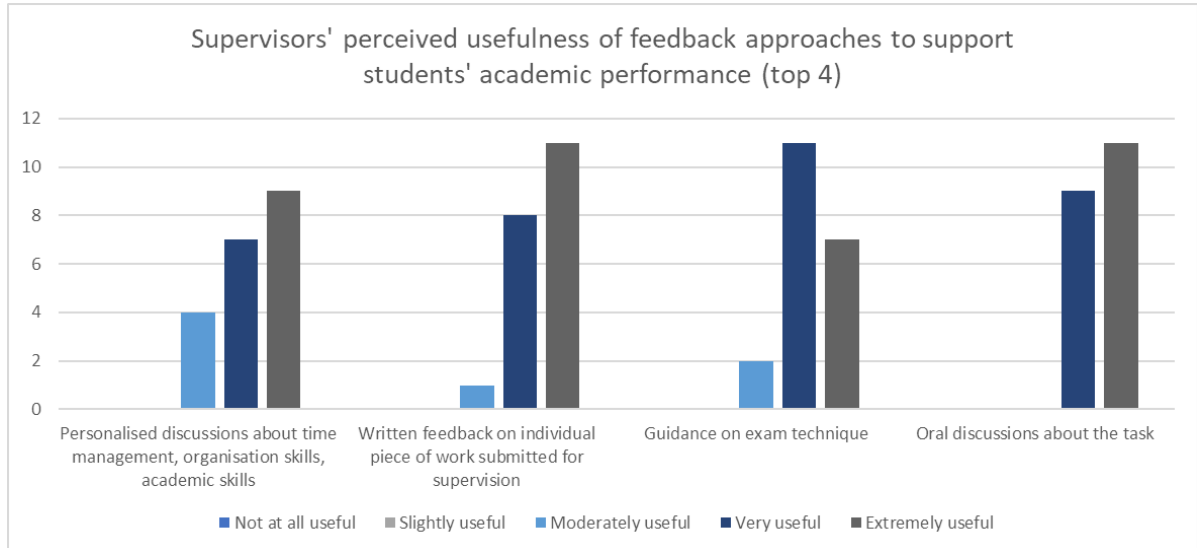


Figure 2: Supervisors' perceptions of feedback approaches that are useful to support their students' academic performance, interest and engagement.

Supervisor responses especially showed that they put much thought and effort into providing quality feedback which they targeted towards increasing students' academic abilities and towards exam training. Many supervisors highlighted specific ways in which they enabled students to make the most of the feedback given. For example, one supervisor *“offered targeted and tailored reading”*, and another *“gave students the opportunity to have a 1-1 chat”* about feedback. Generally, supervisors seemed keen to allow students to ask questions about feedback and create an environment where students were able to receive

feedback in a constructive way. Overall, supervisors emphasised on the importance of comfortable, inclusive, and dialogic supervisions to help students develop their own ways of thinking and working.

“Create an environment where the students feel comfortable receiving feedback (rather than feeling attacked for getting things wrong). Providing constructive feedback and creating an environment where students are more able to improve their work themselves than they learn the skills to improve, rather than relying on changes made by the supervisor.” (Supervisor, STEM)

“Make feedback dialogic rather than a one-way system! Allow them to reflect on their own work before imposing your own criteria. I think that this can help students feel autonomous in their work, become more conscience about how they work, and solicit feedback on the issues that they would like to develop.” (Supervisor, Arts/Humanities)

Feedback approaches to support mental health and wellbeing

Overall, perceptions of both students and staff aligned with what they thought to be useful feedback approaches to support student mental health and wellbeing. The top 3 useful feedback approaches identified by both groups were (see Figures 3 and 4).

- Guidance on exam technique
- Oral discussions about the task
- Personalised discussions about time management, organisation skills, academic skills.

Interestingly, students rated ‘supervisor facilitated peer feedback’ as being least useful for their mental health (this was true for all disciplines), whereas supervisors tended to perceive it as a useful approach. Supervisors tended to perceive ‘estimated/predicted grade’ and ‘numeric mark’ as not useful.

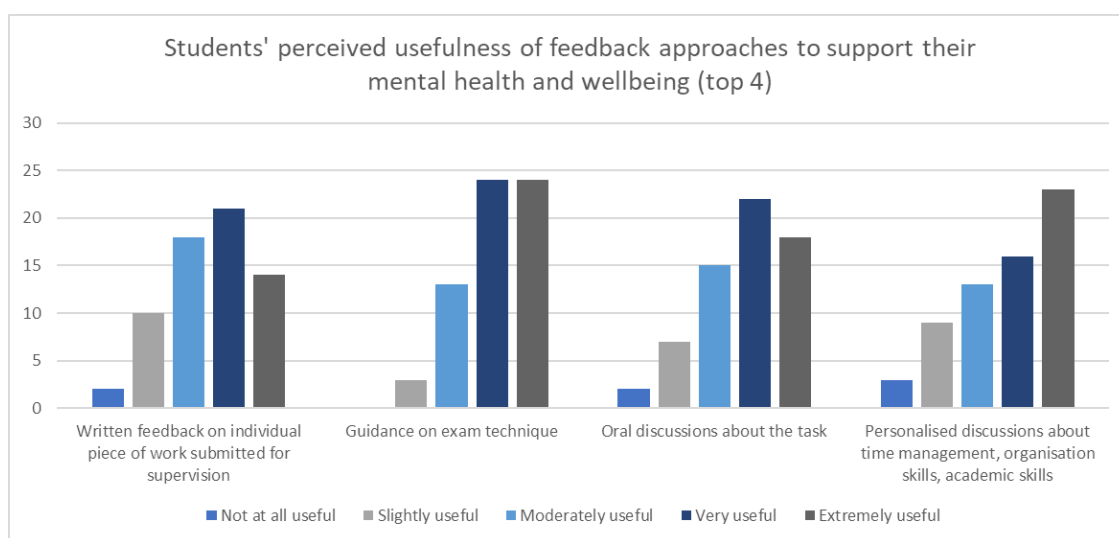


Figure 3: Students’ perceptions of feedback approaches that are useful to support their mental health and wellbeing

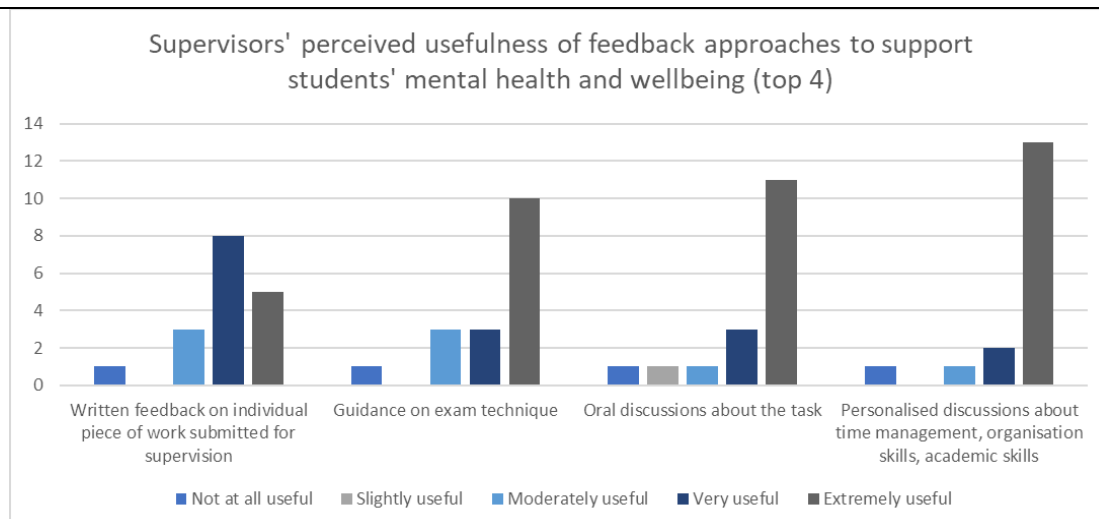


Figure 4: Supervisors' perceptions of feedback approaches that are useful to support their students' mental health and wellbeing.

76% of student respondents said that their mental wellbeing is affected by their supervision feedback. Supervisions impacted students negatively, particularly when students were made to feel at fault for not meeting due dates and completing tasks, often comparing themselves to their peers in the supervision group. Some students acknowledged that supervisors might not have known about their disability or ill health, making it harder to navigate the workload and communication within supervisions.

"I have ADHD and dyspraxia so struggle severely with meeting deadlines, doing specific tasks within question sheets. A lot of the time supervisors can just assume you're lazy or have bad time management which can lead to bad effects for mental health" (Student, STEM)

Students also called out "vague" "harsh/negative" and "unhelpful" feedback for impacting their mental health by contributing to the exam pressure and uncertainty about their learning.

"Supervision reports are usually more harmful than helpful. When the supervisor is reporting good performance, the report rarely adds anything of substance (eg guidance on exam preparation) beyond what was already said in my written essay feedback. When the report is negative, it's usually written in general and unhelpful terms (i.e. the report identifies a problem but specify how to improve, making it discouraging)." (Student, Arts/Humanities)

When asked what is the best thing a supervisor can do to support their mental health when providing feedback, students' responses ranged from "including positive comments in CamCORS reports" and to "Be patient and try to empathise with students who are struggling". As one student highlighted, "I think it's important students feel like supervisions are for their benefit and not just more deadlines to meet." indicating that the role of supervisors play in ensuring that supervisions are not perceived as intimidating spaces for students to perform, rather spaces for learning.

"Make sure the feedback is only about the specific work, not the person and that this distinction is clear!" (Student, Social Sciences)

Supervisors also recognised how intrinsically connected mental health is to academic performance. Particularly by acknowledging that students at Cambridge "work extremely hard but are also self-critical

about even minor errors or slightly weaker performance” as they also “struggle with the workload and particularly balancing or structuring a work/life balance.”

“(…) because I don't believe students can do well academically (certainly not in the long term) if they are not supported in their mental health and wellbeing. So ensuring students know which aspects they are doing well in and are getting feedback that really facilitates their improvement it helps them stay upbeat even when they know there are things they need to work on…” (Supervisor, STEMM)

The tone of the feedback as being “kind and respectful” and devoid of judgement was also emphasised upon, with more focus on “*the progress that students have made rather than just focusing on the end result*”. Some supervisors responded with explanations of what they considered helpful feedback including thoughts like “Constructive feedback which both acknowledges good practice and suggests ways of improving particular areas/skills” and “Give them an opportunity to explain their thinking and guide them towards the better way to put it in paper.” Maybe more strikingly, supervisors seemed to be considering the atmosphere in which this kind of constructive feedback was received, which might need to be explored further.

“I think cultivating an atmosphere in which students aren't afraid to hear feedback is really important - I want to encourage my students to actively ask for feedback on the things that they can improve, and to have the mindset that they can always improve on something - I try to say this to them in supervisions”. (Supervisor, Social Sciences)

This was counterbalanced by an understanding that these more constructive approaches did not mean that compromise on the quality of work was needed.

“Be kind. Being kind does not mean being lenient in marking or when providing feedback. Even strong criticism can be delivered nicely.” (Supervisor, STEMM)

Other supervisors were even quite creative in their ways of trying to boost students’ confidence and create a friendly atmosphere conducive to learning with one supervisor stating “*Make the student write something positive about their own work each week on a feedback sheet*”. Finally, specific elements of timeliness, precision, and clarity were discussed and deemed important by students and supervisors alike.

Summary of perceived usefulness of feedback approaches for academic performance and mental health

Feedback characteristics which were deemed useful by students and supervisors alike seemed to fall into three categories, which broadly aligned with those highlighted in the literature review. These were that feedback should be **forward-looking**, **constructive**, and framed in such a way as to **avoid alienating the students**. Indeed, many responses from students expressed the desire for supervision feedback to allow them to improve. This was true from both a mental health and academic perspective, with the former more focused on pointing out how students were improving or steering clear of “*reels of unhelpful criticism*” and the former more focused on making points of improvement clear, precise and actionable. This tied in with wider conceptions that helpful feedback is balanced in terms of positives and negatives but, more importantly, in terms of being constructive.

Utilisation of feedback and perceived self-efficacy

a. Students

Across disciplines, 73% of the students reported to be ‘mostly understanding’ the feedback provided in supervisions (Figure 5). Additionally, most of the students (combined 72%) said they know how to utilise the feedback for their future performance. This is also known as ‘feedforward’ wherein the primary intention of feedback is to ensure that students are able to implement them in their thinking for future tasks (Sadler et al., 2022¹). Despite this, 52% of the students indicated that they would like guidance and resources on how to effectively utilise feedback in their future studies, suggesting that students are interested in being/feeling empowered about using feedback.

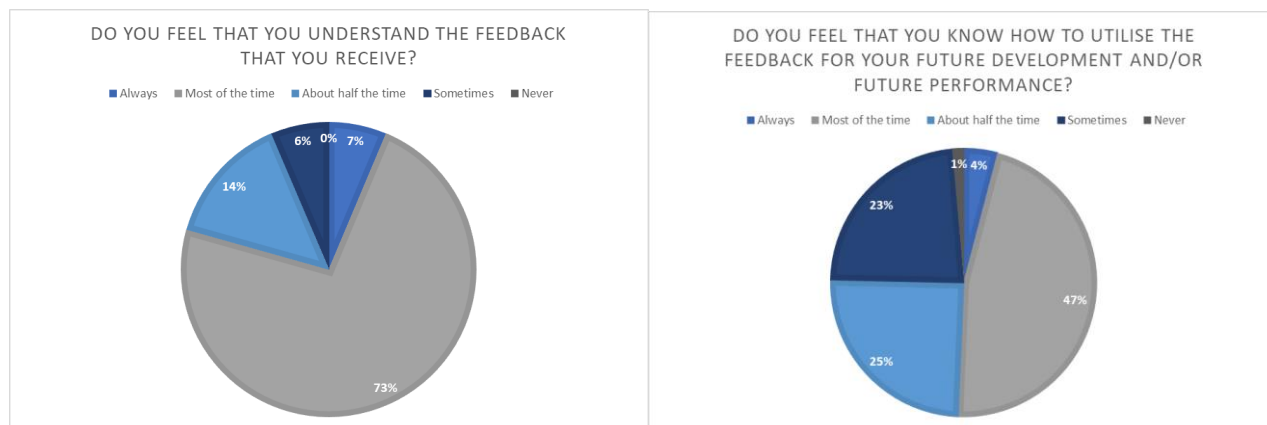


Figure 5: Students’ perceptions about understanding and utilising formative feedback.

Additionally, most of the students (45%) felt that their average marks across their coursework or exams were as per they expected based on the supervision feedback, suggesting that they were able to utilise the feedback obtained in supervision for performance in summative assessments. However, as the quote below indicates, ensuring that feedback is specific and constructive is key to help with preparations for examinations. Furthermore, the experiences of feedback may also vary between supervisors.

“(...) feedback is helpful especially regarding exam techniques as you can pin point specific skills to work on. Feedback is not helpful when you just get told you're bad at x y and z but then don't get told how to best work on it.” (Student, STEM)

“One supervisor is excellent. The other not so much. So for the first one, I feel all the feedback is helpful and I have learnt a lot I can apply in exams and coursework. There seems to be no consistency of approach from supervisors. The first one did so I learnt a lot; the second one didn't so I don't feel as confident in that subject.” (Student, Arts/Humanities)

b. Supervisors

When asked what actions supervisors undertake to facilitate the utilisation of feedback for future tasks, the practices ranged from providing opportunities for 1-to-1 discussions as well as providing feedback before supervisions such that queries about the feedback can be clarified during supervision.

¹ Sadler, I., Reimann, N., & Sambell, K., (2022): Feedforward practices: a systematic review of the literature, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2022.2073434>

“Sending feedback on essays at least a day prior to the supervision. This allows the students sufficient time to go through the feedback and come up with questions. At the start of the supervision, ask students if they have questions about your feedback or if they require any clarification. Encourage them to ask questions. If required, go over the feedback one more time during the supervision.” (Supervisor, STEM)

Another supervisor recognised that discussions about feedback in front of peers can be daunting for some students, and therefore developed a strategy to facilitate more guided feedback.

“I use self-assessment sheets that I dialogue with (both written and orally). I, in turn, have had good feedback from students on this, as it keeps feedback more 'guided' (in one of my students' words) and can also get round the anxiety that student's can sometime have about their own work being discussed too openly in front of their peers.” (Supervisor, Arts/Humanities)

Some supervisors also described seeking feedback about their supervisory practice which would then inform tailored and personalisation to supervisions.

“Asking students to give me feedback on my approach. Inviting students to ask questions via email. Ensuring that track students' progress on feedback that they have received in the past.” (Supervisor, Social Sciences)

Although supervisors have shared some novel feedback approaches to support their students, most of the supervisors (87%) said they would like additional guidance, resources, and training on feedback approaches to be able to better support their students with strong responses like “YES!!” occurring frequently.

“YES!!!!!! Anything that would allow consistency between supervisors would be extremely useful for students. What they will learn in supervisions is down to luck based on what supervisor they get. Without access to a marking schema or anything to indicate what the students are supposed to learn from supervisions or what standards they are expected to be at makes it nearly impossible to ensure the students are learning what they need to from my supervisions. The students are very focused on marks, and while I don't think it's helpful to always have a mark or number grade, I think it's important that supervisors have an idea of where their students are at so they know how to tailor the supervisions to the students' needs.” (Supervisor, STEM)

The main suggestions made on this topic were: 1) offer more, in-depth and paid supervisor training, 2) alternatively, offer more resources to help (like a “centralised support system for supervisor queries”, readings/resources, 3) make a portion of the training/resources about supporting students with mental health issues 4) creating clear standardised feedback processes and a feedback system for students on supervision feedback to diminish variation of supervisory experiences.

*“Example essays and feedback (particularly for difficult scenarios).
- Training sessions focused specifically on wellbeing and mental health in HE teaching (including mental health first aid).
- More complete FAQs or a centralised support system for supervisor queries.
- A structure for reviewing supervision practices with Directors of Studies and to informally discuss issues and progress relating to supervising out with formal CAMCORS reports (which are also seen by students/other staff).”* (Supervisor, Arts/Humanities)

8. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

Findings show that students and supervisors seem to understand feedback in similar ways and value similar types of feedback for academic performance and mental health, albeit some differences in preferences, e.g., students' preference for estimated grades/numeric marks and lack of preferences for supervisor facilitated peer feedback. Students, in the focus group, acknowledged that supervisors were trying to enhance their academic abilities and were less focused on the immediate outcomes of exams which might explain the large gap between students' perspectives on receiving marked work and supervisors' reluctance to do so. This reveals areas which could be improved through additional training, reframing the purpose and environment of feedback so students feel empowered receiving it, and through gaining more insight into the individuality of needs and trying to accommodate them. This extends to how students and supervisors define good practice in feedback and a need for standardisation of expectations across supervisions while allowing for the specificities of each subject/subject area. Most students said they were able to utilise feedback in supervisions in their future tasks as well as for their summative assessments, and supervisors described the different ways in which they facilitate the feedforward process. Both recognised that the experience of supervision can vary based on which supervisors a student gets, and therefore highlighting the importance for basic level of expectations from supervisors through guidance, resources, and training.

9. RECOMMENDED ACTION/FUTURE DIRECTION

1. Training and support for students with mental health conditions

Some suggestions in this regard were providing more extensive training for new supervisors, on how to support students with MH concerns, and allowing them to shadow more experienced supervisors before starting. Further ideas included developing resources and guidelines to standardise feedback procedures, with MH taken into consideration. Finally, supporting supervisors who have questions by creating a centralised platform for supervisor queries or more comprehensive FAQs may help to alleviate some of the concerns which might arise when providing feedback.

2. Personalisation and tailoring supervisions to students' needs and capacities:

Addressing the variability in student needs may also be an area which could greatly improve the ability of students to make use of feedback and ensure that it caters to their particular concerns. Issues with the timing of supervisions, controversial feedback practices (notably providing marks in feedback) and student needs could be assessed by departments to alleviate supervisor concerns and close the gap between student expectations and experience. Suggestions for this included: 1) allowing students to disclose their preferences regarding the timing of work hand-ins, with Arts and Humanities students particularly disclosing that supervisions were so central to their work that it would be helpful to be able to write the essays after the supervision. This would allow more cohesive supervision groups

to be created and more appropriate feedback to be handed in. 2) Students opting-in to get estimated marks/numeric grades if it helps them. This seemed to be a divisive issue even among the student body with some mentioning that grades would allow them to “situate themselves” and others suggesting it would be a cause of stress or that supervisors tended to be overly encouraging/harsh with marks. While it is understandable that supervisors are reluctant to provide marks, it might be helpful to allow students to opt-in to receiving them, for those who feel it would alleviate their concerns. 3) Other specific practices were mentioned which would allow students to feel that they are progressing and utilising feedback. A commonly mentioned frustration from students was the lack of opportunity to make use of feedback on the same essay/struggling to turn the feedback into concrete actions.

3. **Feedback literacy for staff and students:** Providing guidance or resources for students to ways to utilise feedback to deepen their learning and enhance their academic performance. And resources for staff to examine various practices and ways with which feedback can be provided in a positive and constructive manner that intends to equip the students rather than alienating them.

[Appendix 1: Staff survey questions](#)

[Appendix 2: Student survey questions](#)

[Appendix 3: Student focus group questions](#)