

Longitudinal perspectives on students' experiences of feedback: A need for teacher-student partnerships

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ABSTRACT

How students react to and use feedback is an important element of their higher education experience. Within the constraints of mass higher education effective feedback processes are, however, difficult to manage. The aim of this longitudinal qualitative inquiry is to investigate through repeated interviews and related documentary analysis how four case study learners experienced feedback processes over the duration of their undergraduate studies. The analysis is guided by a social constructivist perspective on feedback research. The findings highlight students' development of more sophisticated orientations to feedback over time; how they experienced and used feedback over the shorter and longer term; their varied affective responses; and how their perspectives evolved. The novel aspects of the findings lie in detailing the individual nature of students' responses to feedback and documenting the different ways these changed during their undergraduate studies. The role of grades and projected honours classification was a significant element of the performative nature of the students' experience, and impacted on the extent to which they engaged with feedback. Students often felt that there were dissonances between feedback that teachers were providing and what would be useful or palatable to them. The implications propose that the concept of students as partners can support the reframing of feedback processes as a partnership between students and teachers. Partnership approaches resonate with the need for social constructivist approaches to feedback where knowledge and understanding are co-constructed. Feedback partnerships also carry potential to enable the mutual development of staff and student feedback literacy.

Keywords: Feedback; Assessment; Students as partners; Longitudinal.

Introduction

The potential of feedback to advance student learning is well-established (e.g. Hattie & Timperley, 2007) but implementing effective feedback processes in mass higher education is challenging. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence of student dissatisfaction with feedback and it often fails to stimulate ongoing learner development (Carless & Boud, 2018). Barriers that impede student use of feedback include difficulties in decoding feedback, its affective impact and lack of student engagement (Winstone et al., 2017). These challenges support the view that feedback is a complex and problematic form of communication involving social relationships, mediated by patterns of power, emotion and identity (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001).

Accordingly, there is value in studying feedback as a social process in which relationships are emphasised (Adcroft, 2011). The approach adopted in this paper is informed by social constructivist learning theories which address the interdependence of individual and social processes in co-construction of knowledge. A collaborative social element is important because insights from feedback are developed through interaction, influenced by learner identity, prior experiences and relationships between participants (Price, Handley & Millar, 2011). The massification of higher education does, however, limit opportunities for sustained interaction between students and teachers (Nicol, 2010). A related challenge is that social constructivist principles are generally not being applied to feedback processes and there is often insufficient emphasis on student agency (O'Donovan, Rust & Price, 2016).

A barrier to student agency is the power imbalances between teachers and students which can impede effective feedback exchanges (Small & Attree, 2016; Yang & Carless, 2013). The notion of students as partners represents a way of renegotiating traditional power arrangements in higher education to enable new forms of reciprocal engagement (Matthews et al., 2018). Students can take up different roles in co-creating learning experiences, such as consultants, co-researchers or co-designers (Bovill et al., 2016). Staff-student partnership approaches to assessment have potential to develop teacher and student assessment literacy, yet to date these are relatively uncommon in the literature (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). A study involving six student ambassadors contributing to assessment renewal evidenced fruitful dialogues between staff and students, but also raised issues around scaling up for broader impact (Peseta et al., 2016). Approaches to feedback informed by the notion of students as partners are not covered in much depth in previous literature.

Defining and conceptualising feedback is contested terrain. A conventional view is to see feedback as a mainly cognitive process of information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer or self) about aspects of performance or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). A more process-oriented social constructivist view focuses on the student role in making sense of comments and using them for enhancement purposes (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018). Unless students are able to decode feedback messages, and acquire some of the tacit knowledge of the teacher, teacher transmission of information about performance is unlikely to have much impact (Sadler, 2010). Accordingly, more research is needed on how students use feedback to close short-term and longer-term feedback loops (Carless, 2019). Significantly for the current study, there is little feedback research which adopts a longitudinal perspective. The main aim of the paper is to investigate how a small group of students experience feedback over the duration of their undergraduate studies and analyse how their perceptions evolve. Its significance lies in documenting students' changes over time and analysing their call for more staff-student partnership in feedback processes.

Students' experiences of feedback processes

Relevant literature is reviewed to consider different dimensions of students' perceptions and experiences of feedback. There are mismatches between teachers' and students' expectations or beliefs about feedback with teachers perceiving their feedback as more useful than students do (Carless, 2006). Written summative feedback is often viewed by students as 'single-use' or disposable (Rand, 2017) even when teachers intend to provide comments with broader formative potential. Students often enter university with over-simplified absolutist views of knowledge and a related preference for unequivocal corrective feedback contributes to their dissatisfaction with open-ended feedback practices (O'Donovan, 2017). A phenomenographic investigation of twenty-eight second year physiotherapy students found that most of them perceived feedback in terms of telling and guiding but ideas about developing understanding and opening up different perspectives also occurred (McLean, Bond & Nicholson, 2015).

How feedback processes are conceived and operationalised impacts on student engagement with feedback. A view of feedback as promoting improvement rather than just providing information places emphasis on teachers designing feedback in ways to enable students to act on comments (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Espasa et al., 2018). Guidance within a unit is generally more likely to promote student action than comments at its end (Hounsell et al., 2008). A study of final year biological science undergraduates indicated that higher achieving students show

greater propensity for uptake of feedback than lower achieving ones (Orsmond & Merry, 2013), and indeed acting on feedback represents a key element of student feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018). A recent review, however, identifies that students are often unwilling to expend effort on engaging proactively with feedback information (Winstone et al., 2017).

The extent of student engagement with feedback is often influenced by affective factors: students' feelings, emotions and attitudes towards feedback messages. Awaiting your first university grades and feedback can be particularly anxiety-provoking and involve challenges to self-esteem (Shields, 2015). First-year undergraduates often evidence negative emotional reactions to feedback, particularly when comments are critical or grades are low (Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013). The engagement of Chinese learners may be particularly influenced by affective dimensions of feedback, including the protection of face and the need for harmony (Xu & Carless, 2017; Zhan, 2019). Studies of the affective dimension seem to have particularly focused on the first-year experience and not much is known about how students' affective responses change over time.

There is little research analysing how students' perceptions of feedback develop during their undergraduate programme. Junior medical students were found to view feedback as being mainly summative and preferred positive feedback, whereas senior students saw a more formative, developmental role in feedback and were more open to critical suggestions (Murdoch-Eaton & Sargeant, 2012). It has been suggested that many students become progressively disengaged from feedback during the course of their studies as a repercussion of repeated unsatisfactory experiences (Price et al., 2011), although due to the dearth of longitudinal research this finding requires further scrutiny.

To sum up, the existing literature suggests that students and teachers often do not have shared perspectives on feedback and this can impede student engagement with comments. There is more known about how students perceive feedback than how they use it over shorter or longer time frames. Most of the studies cited above are cross-sectional designs so there is a lack of research which investigates how students modify or develop their approaches to feedback over time.

Method

The study sought to understand how a small group of students perceived and responded to feedback over the duration of their undergraduate study. A suitable means of operationalising these goals was through a longitudinal case study approach. The research questions are:

RQ1: How do student participants experience and use feedback?

RQ2: What changes occur in how the students experience and use feedback over time?

Context and participants

The context for the study was an English-medium research-intensive university in Hong Kong. Since 2012, students in Hong Kong undergo six years of secondary school education instead of seven and thereby have an additional year at university. A four-year Bachelor of Education now becomes a five year one, and to increase its attractiveness is often taken as a double degree coupled with Arts, Science or Social Science. The sample for the study involved four undergraduate students taking 5-year double degrees in Arts and Education. They studied a variety of subjects in Arts, generally of a linguistic or literary nature, and in Education, including educational theory as well as practical experiences in learning how to teach.

I was their academic adviser providing pastoral support. The general academic advising expectation in the university is modest in that the adviser should meet with the advisees once in the first year to welcome them and after that the onus is on students to contact the adviser which they rarely do. My four academic advisees from the September 2013 cohort agreed to participate in the research. Ethical procedures involving informed consent and opportunity to withdraw were followed and ethics approval was granted by the university ethics committee. I do not teach on their programme so potential power issues were less than if I had been involved in assessing their academic performance. The four participants, aged around 18 years old at the outset of the study are all Hong Kong Chinese of female gender, belonging to a programme in which around 75% of participants are female. Their pseudonyms are Alicia, Candice, Eva and Philippa.

The most frequent assessment type in the students' programme was extended written work, typically essays. This was usually a one-shot submission but the students also reported some teachers inviting them to submit outlines or drafts and offering opportunities for oral discussion of work in progress. Other common assessment tasks included oral presentations, group projects and examinations. Units related to teacher preparation also involved assignments such as lesson plans, materials design and reflective writing. Although some units only had a single

task at the end, most had two assessment tasks: one mid-way through the semester and another at the end. Written feedback on assignments was sometimes hand-written or more commonly typed and returned via e-mail or the learning management system.

Data collection

The main means of eliciting student viewpoints on their experience of feedback was through semi-structured interviews. Eight interviews per participant were carried out ranging from fifty to seventy minutes in duration. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

The first interview towards the end of the first semester of year 1 sought to understand how participants perceived feedback and learn about their initial feedback experiences. The next five regular interviews for each informant took place within one to two weeks of them receiving assessment results and feedback on their performance. These interviews involved participants describing their feedback experiences; elaborating how they reacted to the feedback recently received; and probed their perceptions of key features of feedback: its usefulness, the extent to which it seemed dialogic, its potential to be acted upon and its affective impact. As the study evolved and I became better acquainted with each students' experiences of feedback, a key element of the interviews involved specific individual probes and follow-up questions. A seventh summary interview was done in the last year to try to understand their overall perspectives on their feedback experience and, in particular, the extent to which it might have changed or evolved during the 5-year study period. A final member-checking interview was done at the conclusion of the study after provisional data analysis was mature.

Students also shared documentary evidence that could add to understandings of their experiences, principally examples of feedback which they perceived as striking, helpful or unhelpful. Participants also made available on request other relevant information including: unit outlines; assessment guidelines; and some feedback-related e-mail interactions with teachers.

Data analysis

Data were coded as part of making sense of the transcriptions and starting to identify themes. Examples of codes include: defining feedback; effective feedback; acting on feedback; emotional response; praise versus criticism; and so on. Codes were compared and contrasted

within and across cases to develop categories. For example, the codes emotional response, praise, criticism, anxiety, encouragement and so on formed a category of affective response to feedback. The ongoing coding and provisional data analysis informed the next interviews so that later interviews built on earlier ones.

The trustworthiness of interpretations is facilitated through prolonged engagement with the data during the lengthy gestation of the research. Multiple interviews develop trust and rapport which encourage students to gain more confidence to speak openly (Grinyer & Thomas, 2012). The member-checking interview enabled a more co-constructed interpretation than that simply based on the researcher's explanations by summarising the analysis and prompting participants to comment critically.

Findings

Four main themes follow from the data analysis: students' orientations to feedback; students' experience and use of feedback; affective responses; and changes over time. In accordance with the main aim of the paper, a major focus is on how participants' experiences evolve over the five-year period.

Students' orientations to feedback

I begin by outlining how the informants conceived of feedback at three different points in time (year 1, year 3 and year 5). At the outset, Candice perceived feedback as the written or oral comments she received on her assignments to help her improve. Alicia perceived feedback as involving comments on her work including positive aspects and suggested ways of improvement. Eva stated that feedback identifies what students are good or less good at doing and how to improve. Similarly, Philippa saw feedback as providing advice and evaluating what she was good or less good at doing, and how she could do better. There seems to be a consensus in their initial views that a key focus of feedback is on learner improvement, and they mainly perceive feedback as highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of their work.

Candice explained that oral feedback could be helpful in clarifying meaning but by year 3 her experience was that oral feedback was relatively infrequent and she usually did not take up opportunities for dialogue with teachers due to lack of confidence and motivation. By the third year, Alicia elaborated on the improvement function of feedback by envisaging teacher feedback as a means to push students to a higher level. Eva also elaborated on the improvement

function of feedback as follows: 'Teacher feedback helps me understand better how I can improve the next assignment and appreciate better the standards and the requirements'. This comment adds an additional dimension of feedback being benchmarked against standards and the expectations for a specific assignment. By year 3, Philippa prioritised the role of feedback in identifying or clarifying some of the problems in her work in line with a perception that 'the most dangerous situation is when students are working on assignments and they are thinking there aren't any problems'.

By her final year, Candice reiterated the aim of feedback as promoting student improvement and added a point that effective feedback facilitates action, for example, a draft followed by revisions. She also confessed that if it had not been for participation in the research, she probably would not have thought about feedback very much. In the final interview, Alicia described feedback as:

A way for teachers and students to evaluate what they have done and help both parties improve. Teachers can understand better what students are finding difficult and students can get some insights from teachers (year 5).

In this comment, she seems to envisage feedback processes as a form of partnership between teachers and students for mutual improvement (cf. Deeley & Bovill, 2017).

In her final year, Eva reiterated the focus of feedback on learner improvement and also added an affective dimension of positive feedback acting as a driver for enhancement, whereas discouraging feedback would represent a barrier to learner engagement. In year 5, Philippa expressed an elaborated view of feedback:

Feedback is something which makes you go further. It helps you jump out of your own preconceived view and clarify some problems you are unaware of. Feedback tells me what I cannot see myself.

This resonates with the view of a small number of students in the study by McLean et al. (2013) who perceived of feedback as opening up different perspectives.

In sum, the initial student view of feedback was mainly focused on information about performance congruent with the definition of Hattie and Timperley (2007). By the final year, the students' perceptions of feedback seemed to have evolved in more complex ways. These included the need for students to take action, teacher-student partnership in feedback, affective factors and opening up new perspectives. The evolution of more sophisticated thinking about

feedback is not surprising, although previous cross-sectional research designs have not enabled this development to be documented. Greater maturity, wider experience of studying at university and being interviewed repeatedly about their feedback experiences prompt students to reflect and may stimulate the development of their feedback literacy. This was not something that I explicitly promoted but arose as a by-product of the research process.

Students' experience and use of feedback

Codes such as usefulness of feedback; interpreting feedback; and memorable feedback were examples grouped under the category of students experiencing and using feedback. Alicia seldom reported receiving any particularly useful or memorable feedback from her teachers. She perceived feedback mainly as a teacher monologue rather than involving dialogic elements and wanted teachers 'to start a conversation about the feedback' (year 3). Whenever I asked her about feedback that she had acted upon, she invariably found it difficult to evidence actions she had taken in response to comments. In the penultimate year of her study, she expressed the following view that seemed to offer a good summary of her experience:

Students may not be motivated to work hard to improve based on feedback. They may read through the comments but not do anything to follow-up. To a large extent, I am like that. I try to improve but it is difficult: the next course may need another approach or be totally different (year 4).

This quotation summarises students' difficulties in summoning the volition to act on feedback over the longer term, reinforcing previous literature (Price et al., 2011; Winstone et al., 2017).

In her final year, Alicia described a documentary example of some feedback that she particularly appreciated. The teacher feedback was a typed text of one page in length providing general and specific points interspersed with questions. Alicia commented on this feedback as follows:

It is detailed, clear, made specific comments and pinpointed my weaknesses directly. I liked the feeling that she read it carefully. Instead of only telling me what is wrong, I appreciated the way questions were used to stimulate my thoughts (year 5).

Questioning involves a more interrogative mode of providing feedback rather than just teacher comments. Interrogative feedback initiates a form of dialogue by inviting thinking or response which carries potential to develop co-constructed outcomes of feedback processes in line with social constructivist approaches. Greater use of interrogative feedback might mitigate some of the limitations of the transmission forms of feedback critiqued by Sadler (2010).

Throughout her studies, Candice reported finding it challenging to act on teacher comments. She seldom found end-of-semester comments useful but when there were two tasks in a unit she reported that sometimes she could use feedback from the first task to inform the second one. An example of significant feedback she could recall was the idea of covering less ground but in more detail. She illustrated this with a documentary example of some feedback when her teacher had asked her to ‘discuss two points in detail to demonstrate their significance’ (year 1). Eva also drew a similar inference: ‘in year 1 and 2, some teachers mentioned going in-depth rather than too many points so I started to remind myself, four points maximum and then enrich them’. This theme of in-depth analysis occurred frequently in the students’ accounts. It is an example of a generic element of feedback that tended to stick in their minds and seemed to be one of the few issues that they identified as being generalisable across different units.

Similar to Candice, Eva talked about teacher feedback being mainly one-way transmission of information and she did not perceive any need or motivation to engage with end of unit feedback. She also mentioned other barriers:

Sometimes teachers and students are not on the same wavelength. The teacher might talk about something which is not really a student concern, like one teacher just corrected my grammar which is not what I am looking for. Sometimes the comments are too brief to be helpful (year 4).

This suggest a need for more communication to reduce dissonances between teachers and students, not easily achievable in massified higher education without concerted efforts from both parties.

Philippa was a high achieving student throughout her studies. She evidenced multiple instances of being an active seeker and consumer of feedback. She often approached teachers to seek their advice and was eager to enter into oral or written dialogues with teachers. She described a strategy of ‘asking teachers like crazy what they are looking for’ (year 1). A repercussion was that she wanted more dialogue with teachers:

Teachers could do more to identify students’ needs but to really understand us is a long-term process. Dialogue increases the likelihood of matching teacher comments with students’ needs (year 5).

In sum, the evidence was that students often experienced feedback more as a teacher monologue than a dialogue and they often found it difficult to act on feedback, especially comments that came at the end of a unit. They wanted more communication between teachers and students to enhance the prospect of them receiving comments that they perceived as useful.

Affective responses to feedback

The affective dimension of feedback was something that Eva frequently highlighted during interviews. She explained that she came from a humble background and was initially somewhat overawed by the university: ‘in year 1, I sometimes felt nervous and often worried that the teachers would scold me’. This coloured her initial feedback preferences:

I tend to like comments which make me feel good so I prefer positive feedback. It’s nice if they ‘candy-coat’ the feedback a bit with something positive before some critical comments (year 1).

This preference for encouraging feedback resonates with the accounts of first year students in other studies e.g. Shields (2015). Eva also described relational aspects: ‘If I don’t really like the teacher, I wouldn’t be too interested in their comments or I would just read the comments and then that is it’ (year 2). Eva talked in a later interview about the need for sensitivity in feedback interactions:

The basis of feedback should be to respect the student as a person, trust in their potential and make constructive suggestions, not to crush their confidence. Receiving critical feedback can be face-threatening so students need to feel private and safe (year 5).

Critical comments, particularly when delivered in front of peers, can be perceived by students as a threat to their identity even if the teacher only intended them as an honest appraisal.

Candice perceived that positive feedback was motivating whereas negative feedback provoked anxiety, and she stated that was more likely to engage with feedback when she obtained a good grade. In the third year, her most significant feedback experience was a frustrating one when a teacher voiced dissatisfaction with the students’ English language standards. He had commented on every line of Candice’s assignment, especially in relation to grammar and punctuation. She reported feeling ‘a total lack of achievement’ and did not perceive the feedback as helpful because it focused too much on surface aspects that, rightly or wrongly, she did not appreciate. It seems to exemplify a dissonance between teachers and students illustrated in the literature (Adcroft, 2011) in that the content and manner of teacher commentary was not what the student wanted. It seems partly a communication problem (cf.

Higgins et al., 2001) in that the teacher could have articulated better the value of accuracy in good writing and packaged his message in terms of ongoing development rather than frustration with students' linguistic failings.

In year 5, Candice reported that students would be more receptive to critical feedback if they had opportunities to use it when there was still another assessed product. She commented that 'Critical feedback at the end is no use. If feedback is not related to improving the grade, why do we need to care about it?' This alludes to the centrality of grades in the lives of students and reaffirms the importance of timing feedback when there is still opportunity for uptake to improve the unit grade.

Philippa was focused on self-improvement: 'I feel happier if I can identify the problems in my work or if someone else points them out (year 2)'. She did, however, acknowledge that critical feedback sometimes upset her when, for example, her teammates in a group project complained about her 'long, complicated sentences' (year 3). She felt that the willingness to accept negative comments was an enduring struggle. In her final year, she talked about critical feedback as follows:

Your first emotional reaction to critique is not always the right one. As long as the grade doesn't kill my future, I am open to negative comments. I have learnt to accept my strengths and weaknesses, and open myself to critique (year 5).

I infer that handling the emotional side of feedback was an issue with which she felt she had made progress.

There were also relational dimensions. Philippa said, 'I like long comments, emotionally you feel the teachers put in some effort and the relationship seems closer (year 2)' and 'Good feedback is when you know someone is working with you' (year 3). This signals affective dimensions of partnership and closeness. Partnership could also include empathy with each other's position. Similar to Candice, Philippa emphasised the importance of grades and she felt that teachers could do more to appreciate the centrality of grades in the student experience. The performative need for high grades is something that academia and society have imposed on students, so teachers might be more empathetic with this student reality.

In sum, affective and relational elements impacted on student processing of feedback, including: whether teachers provided feedback on what students perceived as important; and

whether critical comments were offered in a supportive, helpful or actionable way. The role of grades was also reaffirmed as a central aspect of the student experience.

Changes over time

A strength of the chosen longitudinal methodology was in tracing changes in the student experience over time. In the first year of her study, Alicia seemed to be adopting mainly a surface approach focused on reproducing what she thought was required, and she reported using learning strategies of revision and memorisation. This seemed largely congruent with a view of learning based on accumulation of facts, resonating with the student epistemologies depicted by O'Donovan (2017). By the middle of her second year, Alicia's grades started improving and she reflected that initially she had been using secondary school learning strategies whereas later she became better tuned to university requirements. In her second year, she worked with some high-achieving classmates on a group assignment and acquired a strategy of using rubrics and criteria to inform self-evaluation of work in progress, indicative of a social constructivist element of learning from interaction with peers.

Alicia reported some change in willingness to approach teachers. In year 3, she described being 'too intimidated to approach the teachers because they seem busy and talented, so I feel a bit stupid and unwilling to interact with them', whereas by year 5 she stated, 'I am now more proactive in looking for comments and asking for advice'. She reported that her increased motivation to approach teachers for guidance related to her cumulative results being on the borderline of Upper and Lower Second Class Honours. She wanted to obtain good grades to maximise her chances of obtaining an Upper Second and felt that soliciting more guidance from teachers could contribute to achieving that goal. So the change in approach was stimulated by a specific aim of achieving the desired honours classification.

In her final year, Candice spoke about how she changed her orientation to feedback over the course of her study:

In the first two years I cared about grades and feedback, how teachers perceived my work and how I was doing. In years 1 and 2, I wanted to get better but now I feel fairly comfortable. From year 3 onwards I realised I am not that good or too bad, so I have lost the motivation to improve. I still care about the grades but not that much about the feedback (year 5).

Candice's case provides support for Price et al. (2011) that students progressively disengage with feedback over the course of their study and adds a reason in that she was satisfied with her level of performance, so felt limited desire to engage with feedback messages.

In the first few years of the study Eva expressed a preference for praise more than critique, yet by the final year her views had evolved:

In year 1, we want more relational feedback because we are unsure about how to write university essays so we need someone to boost our confidence. At my current stage, I know I have the ability to do well so I won't easily be crushed by harsh comments. I have more of an improvement mentality and I need good grades for my honours classification (year 5).

This quotation illustrates the potential fragility of students in the early stages of their university education (cf. Robinson et al., 2013) and also reveals change over time as repeated success brings increased resilience and a stronger focus on improvement. Eva's identity seems to evolve from an anxious first-year to a more confident final year student.

Philippa's main feedback identity was in being a cue-seeker who was striving to understand teachers' expectations in order to meet her goal of achieving high grades. She talked about her development in this aspect: 'I think I have progressed in being able to appreciate the nature of quality. Before I could feel it or observe it but now I think I can express it' (year 5). She seems to be suggesting some progress in acquiring the tacit knowledge of the teacher (cf. Sadler, 2010).

The data reveal the individual nature of student responses to feedback in that even within a study of only four students, there are plenty of variations between them and within their narratives over time. A salient factor affecting student engagement or disengagement with feedback processes seemed to be the impact of grades and projected honours classification. At the risk of over-generalising from a small sample, it seems plausible to propose that being on the borderline of an honours classification might increase interest in timely teacher guidance and feedback. This finding is somewhat different to the disengagement over time described by Price et al. (2011) and requires further verification.

Discussion

Addressing RQ1, how participants experienced and used feedback, the data reinforce the limitations of end-of-semester feedback whereas students were more appreciative of mid-

semester feedback within a two-stage assessment design because there were direct opportunities to use teacher comments. Resonating with other key literature (Boud & Molloy, 2013), a promising way of encouraging student uptake of feedback is for teachers to design assessment in ways which facilitate iterative cycles of processing and using feedback. An implication is that end-of-semester feedback might be somewhat reduced in favour of increased guidance within the teaching of a unit. Rather than providing more feedback, teachers should design for uptake and enable students to make better use of the feedback information that is available to them.

Returning to the feedback definitions discussed earlier in the paper, the student experience of feedback seemed mainly in terms of receiving information about their work. There were some reports of peer interaction, social learning and co-construction with teachers but students seemed to experience feedback principally as a teacher monologue about their performance. If this is how students experience feedback, it represents a challenge for more dynamic co-constructed views of learning congruent with social constructivism. Feedback is for students so their perspectives and agency should be central elements of its processes.

For RQ2, changes in how students experienced feedback were often related to their general academic progress in adopting more sophisticated learning strategies. These aspects of learner development seemed to be stimulated by various factors: working on assignments; teacher feedback; peer learning; and students' own reflections. The data also suggest that students may be looking for different things from feedback at different times. First year students seem to value encouragement whereas as confidence grows, students may become more open to critical feedback.

Changes in response to guidance and feedback also seemed to be driven by students' progress towards their target honours classification, a finding that previous feedback research has not explicitly analysed. The centrality of grades in the student experience of feedback may be partly a reflection of the performative nature of contemporary student life as well as being accentuated by the quest for high standards of achievement in Chinese societies. Undercurrents in the data include: a need for feedback before the final unit grade is awarded rather than afterwards; impetus for high grades as encouraging interaction with teachers; and students' wishes for more teacher empathy in relation to the importance of grades.

The data also suggest that teachers and students need to interact more around feedback issues so that mutual understandings are developed and dissonances reduced. The concept of students as partners provides a starting-point to reframe feedback processes as a partnership between staff and students. Feedback is for students so their perspectives and agency should be central elements of its practice. Partnership approaches also resonate with the need for social constructivist approaches to feedback where knowledge and understanding are co-constructed. Ways of developing feedback partnerships include: student input on preferred types, modes and timing of feedback; students soliciting feedback on issues which they perceive as important and valuable; negotiation around the affective dimension of feedback; and collaborative discussion about how potential benefits of feedback could be maximised. Partnership could fruitfully be extended to involve students as co-researchers of assessment and feedback (cf. Peseta et al., 2016; Rand, 2017). Research and development projects in which teachers and students work together investigating feedback carry a number of benefits, including contributing to the mutual development of feedback literacy.

Teacher-student partnerships in assessment and feedback represent something of a challenge to the existing status quo. Navigating institutional structures, practices and norms can be enabled through transparent mutually respectful activities where teachers and students contribute in different ways to co-creating learning experiences (Bovill et al., 2016). Feedback processes are only likely to be effective if they involve partnership between teachers and students. Teachers need to scaffold opportunities for student use of feedback, whilst only the students themselves can take action to improve their work or learning strategies.

There are methodological limitations and possibilities worth noting. The study involves a small female sample from a specific disciplinary background in a single Chinese context. Investigating a larger sample, perhaps through phenomenographic methods, represents a further possibility but it cannot be assumed that researching more informants is superior because of the compromise between breadth and depth. This study was focused on the student experience of feedback, future research into partnership approaches to feedback could beneficially investigate both teachers' and students' perspectives.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the experiences of a small group of students over the 5-year period of their undergraduate degree through the lens of social constructivism. The novel longitudinal

nature of the research carries considerable merit and might be extended to other settings. The data revealed a wide variety of student experiences, and a key inference is that feedback research and practice should cater better for students' needs in relation to feedback. It is proposed that teacher-student partnerships play a significant role in enabling appreciation of each other's positions and contributing to the mutual development of feedback literacy.

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