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## **The Role of Assessment Feedback in Developing Academic Buoyancy**

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# **The Role of Assessment Feedback in Developing Academic Buoyancy**

## **Abstract**

This research focuses on the everyday challenge in academic learning of assessment and argues that academic buoyancy is a key factor in academic success. To scaffold students' learning and effectively support academic buoyancy, there is arguably a need for a better understanding of (i) what students find most and least useful in their assessment feedback; (ii) how students use feedback to approach future assessments and; (iii) how students respond to feedback in terms of what they think, feel and do.

Key findings from survey responses of 91 undergraduate students were that students use their feedback more than anticipated and look for specific information to help their future performance. In addition, five indicators of academically buoyant behaviour were identified: 'an internal locus of control', 'understanding the grade', 'being forward looking', 'being improvement focused' and 'being action orientated'. These indicators suggested a distinction between students who were academically buoyant because they were constructive in their response to feedback, compared to those who appeared less so because they were not action orientated, but more focused on their emotional response.

These findings have implications for the provision of assessment feedback in higher education and offer insight into opportunities for the development of academic buoyancy.

**Keywords:** resiliency; buoyancy; assessment; feedback; higher education

# **The Role of Assessment Feedback in Developing Academic Buoyancy**

## **Introduction**

Assessment of student achievement and development is an integral and important part of the teaching and learning process. Increasingly, the results of these assessments are used to not only measure the learner, but also as an indicator of educator and institutional performance. Inexorably linked to the assessment process is the feedback that is provided alongside the grade or mark given. This feedback and grade can be helpful and supportive, or could potentially lead to disappointment and distress (Hattie & Timperley 2007). If the latter, demotivation and student dissatisfaction could follow (Carless 2006), resulting in poor student evaluations. Consequently, an understanding of how students use and respond to feedback is a key factor in optimising learner and institutional outcomes.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), for example, seeks to grade higher education institutions based on their teaching quality and it includes a judgement of the feedback process. However, the National Student Survey (NSS), an indicator of student opinion in higher education, shows that assessment feedback is consistently an area of concern amongst learners (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2016).

In addition to these external drivers, there are also internal drivers. For example, the purpose and form of assessment feedback is informed by the values of an institution. Universities with a commitment to social responsibility and widening participation, position feedback as part of the formative learning journey and the relationship built between lecturer and student (Yorke 2003; Merry et al. 2013; Messick 2013).

Therefore, ensuring that assessment feedback is as useful, constructive and as accessible as possible for students is a priority.

However, given that feedback comments on student work involve a critique and judgement of quality and standard, they provide not only the opportunity to assist in the academic development of the learner, but also the potential to cause emotional upset. Assessment is largely based on a deficit model where a perceived expert (Delandshire 2001) makes judgements of success. Such judgements represent challenges and setbacks in academic achievement which are unexceptional aspects of the learning journey for some undergraduate students (Putwain 2007), but for others, can be potentially damaging (Poulos and Mahoney 2008).

The capacity to deal constructively with the cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to issues arising from assessment feedback and to use it developmentally, depends on educational resilience (Wang and Gordon 1994, Wang 1997) and, more specifically, academic buoyancy (Martin et al. 2010, Martin 2013). This will subsequently have implications for academic success (De Baca 2010; Martin and Marsh 2008). Academic buoyancy is defined by Martin and Marsh (2008) as a student's ability to deal with academic challenges such as poor grades, meeting deadlines, or coping with exam pressure and, in addition, coping with the negative emotions associated with some of these challenges (Bouteyre, Maurel and Bernaud 2007).

This research sought to improve feedback practice within a course by asking what elements of feedback students find useful and in what ways they employ feedback to inform their approach to future assessments. It also explores student behaviours in search of those that indicate academic buoyancy and considers what aspects of practice might contribute to the development of this behaviour. In so doing, it focuses on the

typical challenge of dealing with the grading/feedback process, rather than more exceptional chronic issues, and argues that academic buoyancy is key in academic success as it helps students cope with any resulting disappointments. The paper argues that academic buoyancy is important for educational success and that assessment feedback provides an opportunity for its development. Recommendations for practice are discussed.

### **Current context of assessment in higher education**

The importance and potential of assessment and feedback in higher education has been widely recognised (Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Jonsson 2012). Indeed, Jonsson (2012, 63) has described feedback as ‘one of the most potent influences on student learning and achievement’.

Carless (2006) suggested that a reason for dissatisfaction with assessment feedback may be that tutors write feedback in language that students may not understand, or focus on content specific requirements of courses rather than more general skills that may ‘encourage a positive attitude towards future learning’ (Zimbardi et al. 2016, 1). When feedback is related to the learning outcomes, it makes the teaching and learning process more cohesive (Knight and Yorke 2003). Further, there may be an institutional expectation that feedback is the tutor’s responsibility - a ‘transmission process’ (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006, 200) and an academic procedure (Carless 2006), rather than a process that engages the student in dialogue and action.

This highlights areas of tension within assessment and feedback in higher education: student access to tutors, student understanding of tutors’ language, the degree to which students participate in dialogue about feedback and whether they engage with the feedback process at all.

## **Feedback or feed-forward?**

A burgeoning argument focuses around supporting students in improving their future performance (feed-forward) rather than focusing on past performance (feedback) (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Jonsson 2012). Boud (2007) advocates the importance of reframing assessment as integral to the learning process; a more formative activity, that works towards creating what Sadler (1989) calls a 'feedback loop' in which student responsibility is emphasised.

However, Wimshurst and Manning (2013, 451) postulate that whilst the 'theoretical justification for the apparent benefits of feed-forward is strong, the empirical support for such confidence remains slight', suggesting the need for further exploration to provide the evidence base for an increased emphasis on feed-forward.

## **Student Use of Feedback**

Students utilise their feedback in different ways and to different degrees. Jonsson (2012, 64) states the importance of explicit teaching on how to utilise feedback to optimise impact because 'many students did not read their teachers' written feedback. Those who did...seldom used them'. Such a lack of engagement with feedback potentially leads to a significant impact on performance (Zimbardi et al. 2016). In contrast to this, studies have shown that use of feedback can be context specific with some students using it for guidance and learning (McCann and Saunders 2009).

In a review of factors that influence students' use of feedback, van Heerdan, Sherran and Bharuthram (2016) identified the timing of feedback, the specific nature of the guidance, the degree of positivity it contains and the degree to which students can act upon the advice given. Some students have under-developed strategies for dealing



constructively with feedback, instead resorting to 'diffuse strategies' such as working harder (Jonsson 2012, 69), suggesting that there is a need for further investigation.

### **Academic resilience and buoyancy**

The dynamics of power within lecturer-student relationships could be considered an important factor in students' ability to meaningfully engage with feedback. Carless (2006) argues that a purpose of feedback should be to empower students to become self-regulated learners, but Boud (2000) argues that if power lies with those in a teaching capacity, students are unlikely to develop necessary self-regulation skills.

It would seem that student interpretation and use of feedback is crucial to its effectiveness. Poulos and Mahoney (2008, 144) advocate that this involves '...both psychological state and disposition'. Yorke (2003) goes on to suggest that an awareness of the psychology of giving and receiving feedback is important to learning. Carless (2006) argued that students who achieved higher grades tended to be those who were more successful in using their feedback to develop self-regulated learning skills and were more autonomous learners, linking with the concept of academic buoyancy (Martin and Marsh 2008).

Academic buoyancy refers to a student's ability to cope with daily academic 'hassles', including the negative emotions associated with academic life (Bouteyre, Maurel and Bernaud 2007). Building upon the work of Jonsson (2012), assessment feedback could therefore potentially impact upon academic buoyancy, thereby affecting both student outcomes and their evaluations of the effectiveness of feedback.

## **The role of emotions**

Some argue that the assessment process is deeply emotional (Boud 1995). Students who are more secure in their attainment levels are more receptive to feedback, whereas feedback for weaker students is more likely to impact on self-concept and levels of motivation (Carless 2006).

Poulos and Mahoney (2008, 152) describe ‘the devastating effects of negative feedback’, but also assert that effective feedback can provide emotional support, feed-forward comments and also support student adjustment and inclusion within a University environment. Jonsson’s (2012) review suggested that students with low self-esteem have a greater propensity to react harmfully to negative feedback than those with a more healthily developed self-esteem. This links to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) point about the importance of promoting self-efficacy and self-esteem, whilst providing the critical comments that students need in order to develop their academic skills (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2002).

## **The role of dialogue**

Taking into account the varying degrees to which students utilise feedback, the emotional component and the feed-forward potential for future learning, engaging in dialogue with students would seem to be an important factor in maximising the impact of feedback. Nicol (2010) suggests that feedback should be an active process between lecturers and students and resulting dialogue could be a key vehicle for developing academic buoyancy. In advice given to markers by Lizzio and Wilson (2008), written feedback should aim to provide a balance of assignment specific feedback and that which is more transferable, as well as recognising effort and providing socioemotional support. Enacting this within the student-tutor dialogue may help to develop a ‘shared

understanding of feedback' (Poulos and Mahoney 2008, 153) and strengthen its quality.

A dialogic approach may also assist the student's ability to develop 'assessment literacy' (Wimshurst and Manning 2013, 452) and recognise further their own role in optimising feedback use.

This paper explores what aspects of the current feedback format BA Education Studies students, in one higher education institution in England, find most and least useful and in what ways they use feedback to inform how they approach future assessments.

Further to this, it explores links with academic buoyancy.

## **Method**

### **Data collection**

The research stemmed from an aim to develop practice by focusing on and problematizing an aspect of our work. This emphasis on informing and improving practice, within the context of critical reflection and 'theory-based' conversation (McAteer 2013, 12) situated the study as action research (Elliott 1991). It takes what McNiff (2002) terms a living theory approach to action research that recognises that knowledge and action are linked to values. The values that underpin our work are that all aspects of it should benefit learners (McNiff 2002) – in this case, the feedback process should help the students develop their academic skills, knowledge and understanding alongside their academic buoyancy. As McNiff says (*ibid*, 13), research is 'not a set of concrete steps, but a process of learning from experience, a dialectical interplay between practice, reflection and learning'. This process of dialectical reflection involved learning through feedback from our students and changing practice accordingly - informed by the value of keeping student wellbeing at the heart of what we do.

The findings from a pilot study of 20 responses fed into the development of the full survey (McNeill and Chapman 2005). A 10-question survey (Table 1) was then administered to the entire cohort of 100 undergraduate BA Education Studies students. The survey consisted of a mixture of multiple-choice and short answer questions generating largely qualitative data, exploring ‘feelings, attitudes and judgements’ (Walliman 2011, 216) with some quantitative elements to give an indication of scale (210).

Given that this procedure was framed as part of our usual course and module review process, we were acting within standard University ethical guidelines. However, participants were informed that responses would feed into this research project, would remain anonymous and that they had the option to withdraw. The survey returned 91 responses.

As lecturers conducting research with our students, we were conscious of the power imbalance between us. However, as we regularly seek feedback and make explicit changes to practice as a result, there is an existing discourse around a powerful student voice, thereby countering this imbalance as students are aware of the influence they have (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015). The possibility of social desirability bias was also considered, however using an online method helped to reduce this (Gittelman et al 2015).

## Table 1

### *Buoyancy Questionnaire*

- 1) How are you hoping to benefit from your feedback?
- 2) When you receive feedback on your assessments, rank the following in order of value to you (1 as highest, 5 as lowest)
  - a. Annotations on the script
  - b. Running commentary
  - c. General comment
  - d. Descriptors that show the reason for the grade
  - e. The grade
  - f. Recommendations for improvement
- 3) What would your ideal feedback sheet contain?
- 4) What would be your preferred way of receiving feedback: (tick one)
  - a. On a standardised template received electronically
  - b. Free text received electronically
  - c. Recorded audio comments
  - d. Individual tutorials
  - e. Group tutorials
  - f. Other? (please specify)
- 5) When you receive feedback, would you say you generally (tick one)
  - a. Read it carefully alongside your submission
  - b. Just skim through it
  - c. Just look at the grade
  - d. Don't read it
- 6) After receiving feedback, have you ever done any of the following? (tick all that apply)
  - a. Taken notes
  - b. Made a plan for future assessments
  - c. Sought advice from a tutor or other
  - d. Sought help from a skills book, or web source
  - e. Returned to feedback when working on another assessment.
- 7) Describe your thoughts when you get a disappointing grade.
- 8) Describe how you feel when you get a disappointing grade.
- 9) Describe what you do when you get a disappointing grade.
- 10) If you get a disappointing grade, does the feedback help you manage this disappointment?
  - a. If yes, how?
  - b. If no, why not?

## **Data analysis**

We chose to interrogate our data ‘manually’, rather than employ inferential statistical analysis techniques and used descriptive statistics to describe it. This was to get close to and immerse ourselves in the data to respond to our research questions. Responses were analysed for themes with consideration of frequency of occurrence. Sub-themes were then developed. This necessitated a degree of interpretation, however triangulation between the 5 researchers added to the credibility of the analysis.

A positivist approach to research would find ‘insider research’ (Brannick and Coghlan 2007) problematic and require distance between the researcher and the data. However, we believed our insider position was a strength as it allowed us to use tacit knowledge through a process of combining reflexive awareness with theoretical knowledge (ibid). We recognised and were aware of our position as ‘insiders’ at all levels of the research and chose to work with this rather than problematize it.

The data were analysed over three phases.

### ***Phase 1***

Phase 1 described and summarised the quantitative data from questions 1-6 (see Table 1) as a proportion of the total number of students that had answered that particular question e.g. x/91.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, informed by Clarke and Braun’s (2013, 121) approach of ‘weaving together the analytic, narrative and (vivid) data extracts to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story’

## ***Phase 2***

This phase also involved a thematic analysis. This consisted of the mining of the qualitative responses to questions 7-10 (see Table 2) to explore elements relating to academic buoyancy. The first step was to categorise this data as 'thoughts', 'feelings' or 'actions' which led to the formation of 'subset 1' consisting of 23 respondents who had expressed negative thoughts and/or feelings - being upset and distressed about their feedback/grade - and identified themselves as not having subsequent constructive behaviours, such as acting positively to help manage this upset.

## ***Phase 3***

The final phase consisted of the further analysis of subset 1 by exploring responses from question 10 and categorising them into subset 1a or 1b according to whether their disappointment led to either constructive or unconstructive behaviours, supported by the feedback, thus providing insight into their academic buoyancy.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Students utilise their feedback and do so in a range of ways***

Current practice consists of written feedback presented on a template. The template includes shaded grade descriptors against assessment criteria, a running commentary, a general comment and recommendations for improvement.

### ***Phase 1***

The findings from Phase 1 showed that students do read feedback and use it in a range of ways.

Over half of the responses (48/91) reported that they read their feedback carefully alongside their submission. Rather than a narrow focus on the grade achieved (6/91 students), a substantial number of students (80/91) talked about feedback in terms of feedforward improvement:

‘Giving me the knowledge of how I can improve on the next assignment’

Whilst most of this feedforward potential was focused on improving generally (67/91), a smaller number were specifically focused on improving their academic writing (13/91). Students stated they wanted to know the ‘mistakes’, the ‘weaknesses’ and where they ‘went wrong’ (23/91). Qualitative data revealed comments such as:

‘By receiving information of what I did wrong’

‘To understand weaknesses’

‘To be able to improve my writing skills for the next assignment’

Although a number of students (37/ 91) initially ‘just skimmed through’ feedback, a number demonstrated proactive, action orientated responses over time. For example, some returned to their feedback when working on another assessment (28/91); sought advice from a tutor or other academic support (25/91); made a plan for future assessments (16/91); took notes on their feedback (12/91); or sought help from a skills book or web source (10/91). Therefore, it appeared that feedback was not just a static object, but a prompt for further action and a resource for future assignments.

These findings are encouraging in the light of Boud (2007) who argued for a reframing of assessment feedback as a formative process. Hounsell (2003) also advocated the need for students to use their feedback to understand how well they were doing and how



to improve. The findings suggest that, on this particular course, students are using feedback in a range of ways to inform their overall learning and development, rather than focusing narrowly on one piece of work.

As well as improving academic learning and development, feedback was reported to help manage feelings when a disappointing grade was received (51/91). This too was in different ways as illustrated below:

***Table 2 Themes from the qualitative responses on how feedback supports the management of feelings***

A	Informs of mistakes
B	Informs of ways forward for next assessment
C	Prompts discussion with tutors
D	Provides support for improving next time
E	Provides reassurance
F	Clarifies reason for the grade
G	Informs of strengths of assessment

These themes indicate how feedback aids in the management of feelings following a disappointing grade by being informative, not only of how they performed in the assessment (A), but also of what action they might take next (B, C, D), and providing reassurance (E). For example, if a grade was disappointing, the feedback provided reassurance through clarifying the reason for the grade (F) and pointing out the strengths of the assignment (G). This indicates that feedback is a source of both academic and emotional support following a disappointing grade.

## *Phase 2*

Evidence of action orientated, constructive responses to feedback, which also helped students manage their emotions, led to a further exploration of data on what respondents think, feel and do, in search of academically buoyant behaviour. The use of feedback as a way to manage emotional responses reflects the work of Yorke (2003) who suggested that the psychological processes in receiving feedback are important to student learning. This role of emotions is further explored below, but what is demonstrated here is that emotional responses seem to be an important aspect of academic buoyancy.

The findings suggest that collectively, students and academics seem to be moving towards using feedback in a feed-forward way, representing a shift in focus from previous practice of how feedback is provided, to using it for developmental purposes (Boud and Molloy 2013).

### *Five indicators for academically buoyant behaviours were identified.*

The data from the phase 2 analysis suggested that those students who used their feedback to help them manage their feelings following a disappointing grade were effectively exhibiting academic buoyancy, characterised by certain factors. Five key indicators of specific behaviours and attitudes emerged. These were (i) an internal locus of control; (ii) understanding the grade; (iii) looking forward; (iv) being improvement focused; and (v) action-orientated behaviour. These are explored below.

#### *(1) Internal locus of control*

When asked to reflect upon a disappointing grade, students made attributions around where the responsibility for the grade lay. The majority (43/48) expressed an internal locus of control (Weiner, Nierenberg and Goldstein 1976) for their grade and future

action thereby taking responsibility. A minority expressed an external locus of control (5/48), placing blame on the lecturer, the university, or another external circumstance.

Of those with an internal locus of control (43) there was a tendency towards being action orientated (16/43). The qualitative data revealed comments such as:

‘Look at what I did wrong and how I can improve next time’

This was not necessarily the case with those who demonstrated an external locus of control, placing the accountability elsewhere and consequently not seeing themselves as agents or responsible.

The locus of control distinguished those who were academically buoyant– despite the adversity of a disappointing grade and evidence of tendency towards emotion (43/48).

## (2) *Understanding the Grade*

A key element within any academic developmental journey is to understand current skills and capabilities (Hounsell 2003) as a baseline from which to improve. To do this, students need to understand the grading system and criteria.

Students who used their disappointment constructively, seemed to understand why they had achieved their grade. The qualitative data revealed comments such as:

‘It [feedback] shows how and why I didn’t get the grade I was aiming for with a chance to work towards achieving higher in the future.’

‘It [feedback] helps me to understand the reasoning behind the grade I got.’

This contrasted with those students who expressed bewilderment or surprise at the grade they received.

‘Angry and upset as I feel like I have done a good job’

This suggests that understanding the grade through use of the feedback helps a student to be academically buoyant and overcome the adversity of a disappointing grade. This resonates with Hounsell (2003) who emphasised the importance of knowing how we are doing and what we need to do next.

(3) *Being Forward looking*

This indicator emerged from constructive comments in response to a disappointing grade (36/91) which demonstrated being forward-looking. The data suggested that a number of these students (16/36) perceived each assessment feedback episode as contributing to their journey within academia in a formative manner. They appeared not to compartmentalise assessments within modules or view them as separate events, but to see links and connections between them.

Comments described on receipt of a disappointing grade included:

‘Unhappy but I try and learn from this mistake’

‘Able to go back to read it at a late (sic) date as a support’

Consequently, using the feedback in order to look forward appeared to be another characteristic of those students who were academically buoyant. They were able to look forward and beyond the disappointment in a constructive way towards the next assessment (Zimbardi et al. 2016, 1).

(4) *Being Improvement focused*

This emerged as a further indicator of the formative use of feedback from those students who said that it helped them to manage their disappointment (51/91), with the majority being improvement focused (36/51), with comments such as:

‘... I can use the feedback given to gain a better grade next time.’

‘Because it outlines the areas I need to improve in in order to get the grade I wanted next time in another module.’

‘How can I improve in future work?’

It suggested that being able to use feedback as a source of information for ways to improve, contributed to being academically buoyant.

In this way, it appears that students, in being improvement focused and in using their feedback, aided development of their own self-efficacy and self-regulation (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) which in turn develops academic buoyancy (Jonsson 2012).

(5) *Being action orientated*

An additional significant factor in academic development is recognition of the need to adopt a proactive approach resulting in constructive action (Sadler 1989). The indicator of being action orientated emerged from question 9 (36/89) and provided evidence of the use of feedback as a stimulus to prompt action that would support future improvement.

The qualitative data revealed comments such as:

‘Immediately seek to have a meeting to not make those mistakes again’

‘Create a plan in order to improve and note down any important notes given by the person who marked it.’

Such action orientated behaviour distinguished those who were academically buoyant because they were able to manage their disappointment in a proactive way. This relates to Sadler’s (1989) ‘feedback loop’ where action following the receipt of feedback was an important element.

*Less constructive emotional reactions can still lead to academically buoyant behaviours*

Phase 3 of the analysis, which focused on students’ emotional response to the adversity of a disappointing grade, revealed a high level of emotionality with a potential impact on their sense of self. A key focus which emerged were responses dominated by emotions of feeling down and disappointed (64/91). A number were coupled with responses describing loss of confidence (20/64) with comments such as:

‘I’m always really upset and my self- esteem always deteriorates.’

‘Gutted, confidence knocked for the next assignment. Annoyed when I know I have tried my hardest and attended every session.’

‘Shut off, go quiet, get upset, eat.’

A high level of emotionality could represent a potential threat to academic buoyancy (Martin and Marsh 2008). Subset 1 (23) identified in phases 2 and 3 of our analysis,

consisted of those who responded with a high level of emotionally negative thoughts relating to the feedback. Consideration of subsets 1a (10 - those who felt the feedback helped them manage this disappointment) and 1b (13 - those that did not) allowed exploration to see if any of the 5 indicators of academically buoyant behaviour were present.

*Less constructive emotional response, subset 1a – who considered feedback helpful*

It was found that even within this group, feedback was found to be useful. Students were looking for suggestions for improvement and an understanding of what they had done wrong (10/10). In addition, respondents wanted their strengths highlighted (7/10) and a rationale for their grade (4/10). This suggests that, despite a negative emotional reaction, there are indicators of academically buoyant behaviour.

*Less constructive emotional response, subset 1b – who considered feedback not helpful*

Amongst subset 1b (those who said feedback was not helpful in managing their disappointment - 13/23), there was still recognition of its value and indicators of academically buoyant behaviour were still present. These included, seeking advice from a tutor or other (6/13); making a plan for the future (5/13); returning to their feedback when working on another assessment (5/13); taking notes (4/13).

Furthermore, respondents suggested that ideal feedback would contain suggestions for improvement (9/13); highlight their strengths (6/13); and provide the rationale for their grade (5/13).

These responses suggest one or more of the 5 indicators of academic buoyancy: having

an internal locus of control, being action oriented, forward looking, improvement focused and wanting to understand their grade.

Thus indicators of academic buoyancy can still be present even for those with a strongly negative emotional reaction and the perception that feedback was not useful. This suggests that feedback has potential to help develop the capacity to overcome setbacks and disappointment, thereby supporting the development of academic buoyancy, as suggested by Jonsson (2012), for students at all levels.

## **Discussion**

It has been argued that it is important to shift the focus from how feedback is provided to how students *use* feedback (Boud and Molloy 2012), particularly to feed-forward. However, the empirical evidence base of how feedback is used has been insufficient (Hounsell 2003; Wimshurst and Manning 2013). Our findings have shown that students actually do use their feedback and in a range of ways, which includes feeding forward to the next assignment. Our findings thus suggest that explicit teaching of how to use feedback could prove valuable.

The literature has suggested that the assessment process is a deeply emotional one (Boud 1995). An important finding here was that students were using assessment feedback to manage their emotions when they received a disappointing grade. This concurs with the work of Poulos and Mahoney (2008) and Zimbardi et al (2016) who link disappointing grades to strong emotional responses. Our findings nuanced this suggesting that, even if the immediate emotional reaction to a disappointing grade was negative, this did not cause all students to remain negative as the feedback actually helped them to cope with emotional reactions. In this way, feedback became even more



important because not only did it trigger emotional responses, but it also helped manage those responses, thereby playing a crucial role in the assessment process.

The theoretical framework of academic buoyancy has been helpful in exploring the data further to understand how students were managing their emotions. Mining the data using this as an underpinning framework helped us to extract five indicators of academically buoyant behaviour. These were defined as indicators because they were displayed by students who, despite having had strong emotional responses to a disappointing grade, were able to channel their emotions into being able to cope with this typical challenge of academic life.

The five identified indicators have enabled us to consider how developing and fostering academically buoyant behaviours can be a way to support students to use their feedback by turning, what can be strong emotional responses, into productive behaviours and actions.

However, within this initial cycle of the action research, it became apparent that further detailed responses were needed in order to fully explore how the assessment feedback helped students manage the emotional responses to receiving a disappointing grade. In addition, the extent to which the five indicators of academic buoyancy could be incorporated into the personal and academic development of students was an important consideration.

Consequently, a second cycle for this research will focus on qualitative data from focus groups and individual interviews exploring the impact of changes made to practice.

## Conclusion

The exploration of student attitudes towards feedback and their thoughts, feelings and actions in response to the receipt of a disappointing grade is informative. If feedback is to be viewed 'as one of the most influential and effective learning paradigms' (Zimbardi et al. 2016, 1), then it is important to explore ways to make that opportunity as useful and as effective as possible.

However, given the influential nature of the power relationship (Boud 2000) between the provider and the receiver of feedback, it is crucial to remember that it may lead to disappointments and set-backs which could damage student motivation and affect their sense of self.

Consequently, feedback that can help develop academic buoyancy (Martin and Marsh 2008) and support the development of self-regulation (Carless 2006) would appear to be the foundation of effective practice, as it would enable students to deal with grades that are lower than expected by encouraging and nurturing constructive strategies and behaviours.

This research indicated that there appear to be five indicators of academically buoyant behaviour:

- (1) *Internal locus of control*
- (2) *Understanding the grade*
- (3) *Being forward looking*
- (4) *Being improvement focused*
- (5) *Being action orientated*

The study also demonstrated that the students consulted and used feedback more than anticipated, which supports the idea that the feedback process presents an opportunity to scaffold their development.

Consequently, it would seem that effective feedback is that which:

- a. Clearly recognises effort and achievement and encourages the student to take responsibility for the work and the grade given, rather than look for external reasons and excuses
- b. Provides a clear indication of why the grade was given against explicit criteria and grade descriptors
- c. Makes reference to the fact that the assessment does not stand alone, but is part of a longer journey
- d. Provides concrete suggestions as to things that could be developed and improved in future assessments
- e. Makes suggestions as to actions that could be taken to assist these developments and improvements

Given the positioning of this study as action research, the results have led to three changes to practice. Firstly, to explicitly teach the concept of academic buoyancy and the five indicators of buoyant behaviour in a first year (level 4) skills module. Secondly, to adopt a revised course template for assessment feedback that provides tighter shaded grade descriptors against each criterion; a positive comment highlighting what was done well; an explicit section for recommendations that is encouraging and provides concrete points for development and suggestions for actions to help students improve; the grade; and a section for student-devised action points. Thirdly, to ask students to share and discuss resulting self-devised action points in personal tutor meetings.

Given the limitations implied by sampling and scale, this research makes no claims regarding the generalisability of the results, but hopefully it may be of interest to other academics and lead to reflections on feedback practice and its impact on academic buoyancy.

The next phase is to trial the changes to practice listed above and then conduct further investigation to ascertain whether the amendments have assisted with the development of academic buoyancy; have led to improved student outcomes; and furthermore, have improved student evaluations of feedback in internal and external measures including the NSS.

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