



# First Year in Higher Education Conference

AN APPLE FOR THE LEARNER: CELEBRATING THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

HOBART • TASMANIA



University of the  
Sunshine Coast  
Queensland, Australia

## FIRST YEAR PERCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK: AN APPLE FOR THE TEACHER?

Anna Potter & Kathy Lynch,  
University of The Sunshine Coast

# Context

- The University of the Sunshine Coast is a small regional institution with a student population of 4000
- The majority of students are first in family to attend uni and from low socio-economic background
- Average age of students is 25, however 45% of students are under 21
- USC, like many universities, faces the challenge of first year retention

# The research question

- What effect does assessment feedback have on first year students' engagement with learning?
- Outcomes:
  - an understanding of the efficacy of existing feedback
  - the creation of guidelines for first year student feedback

# What did we already know?

- First year experience and results reverberate throughout a student's degree
- The will to succeed is as important as the ability to succeed
- Students can suffer from the lack of close monitoring they received at high school
- There are social elements over which universities have no control

# And...

- Assessment methods are a critical influence on student learning
- Students often focus on marks, rather than the learning experience itself
- Receiving feedback during first year is a watershed moment
- Assessment criteria need to be easily understood.
- Assessment must enable students to bridge gap between performance and goals.

# The research design

- Data were collected using an online survey
- Participants were recruited from entire student body, via email and course web links.
- Participation was voluntary, and anonymous
- Qualitative and quantitative data analysed to describe the phenomena in words and numbers
- Students gave personal details but these were decoupled from the data

# The survey

- An online survey open to all students, regardless of their year of study
- 19 questions, requiring qualitative and quantitative responses
- 304 responses received, 52% of these from first years

# Question themes

- Perception of failing
- Benefits of feedback
- Structure of feedback (clear, comprehensible & timely)
- Comfort in asking for more feedback
- Objectivity of marking

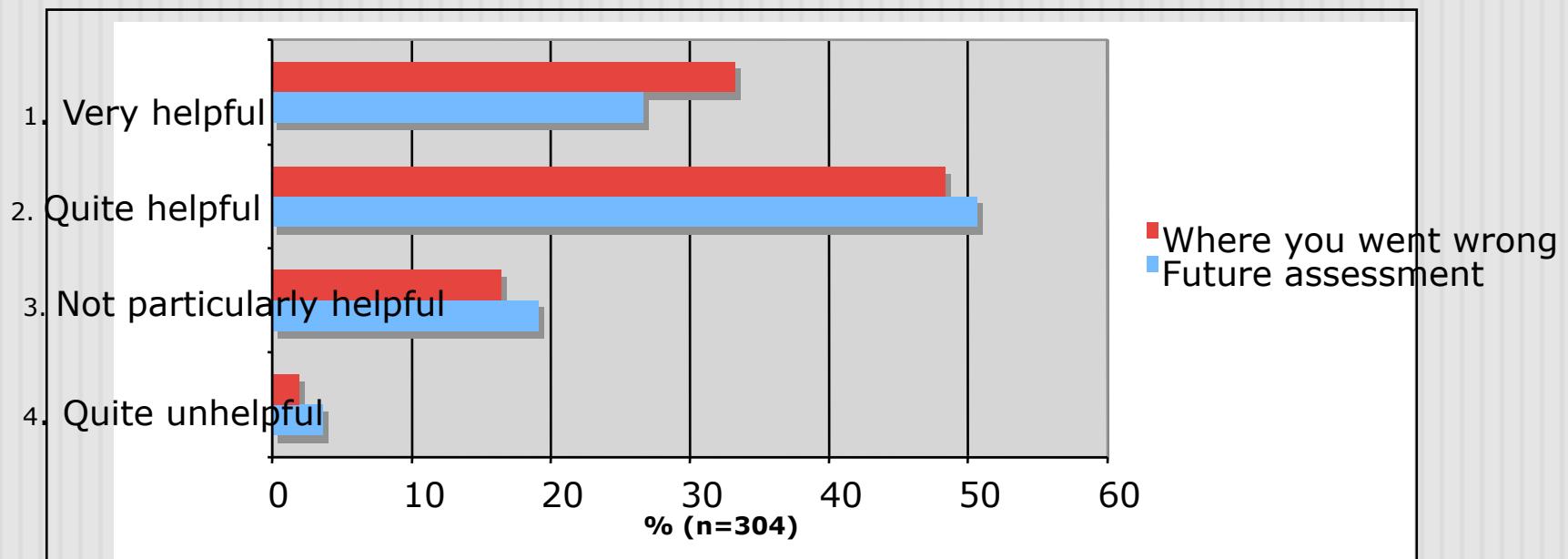
# What our students told us

- How did you feel if you failed a first year assessment item?

N=111	%	N=11
1. I was completely devastated	27.3	
2. I was upset	46.8	
3. It didn't bother me	3.6	
4. I wasn't surprised	15.3	
5. It made me wonder if uni was for me	7.21	

# ATTITUDES TOWARDS HELPFULNESS OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

In terms of helping you see where you've gone wrong and showing you how to do better in future assessment?



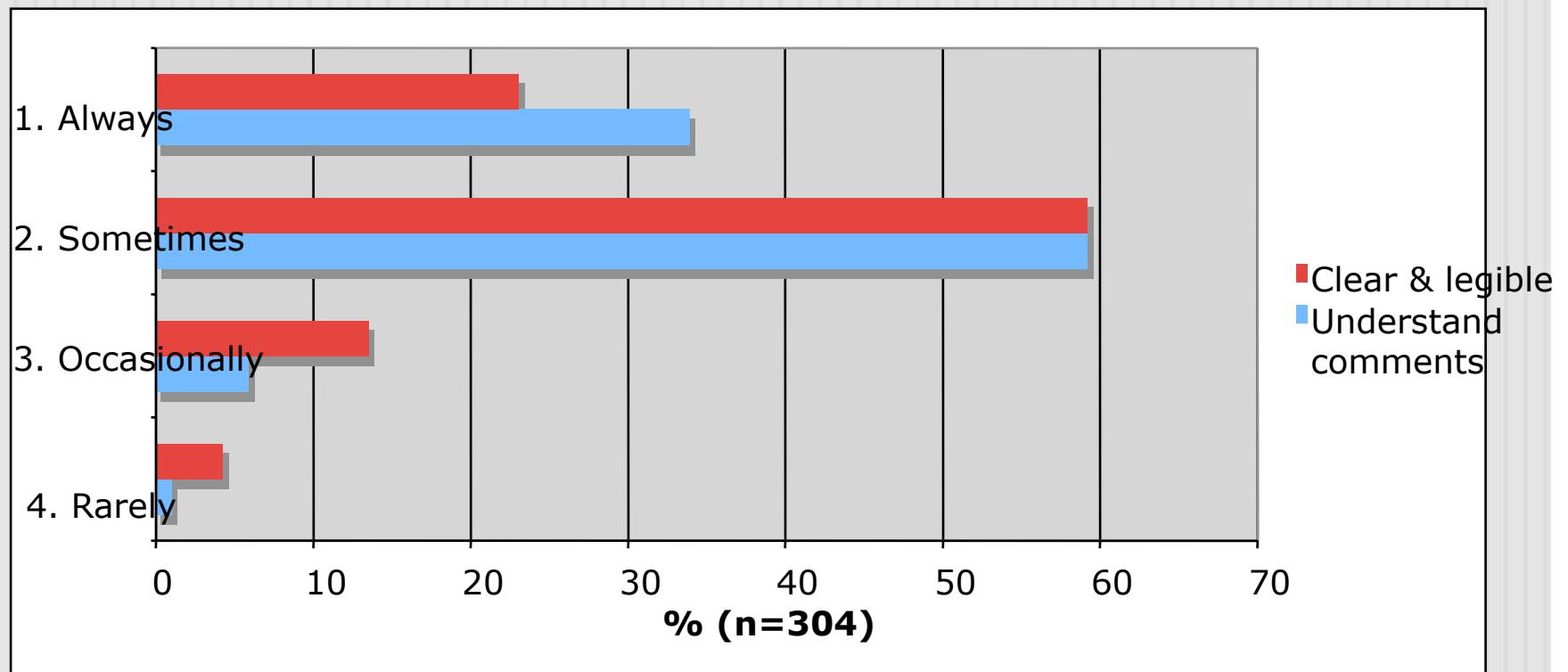
# Comments on theme: helpfulness

- *I am always open to learning and feedback teaches so much.*
- *No feedback other than a series of ticks, leaving no clue as to what marks were lost and for what.*
- *It is very helpful if it is not generic but tells you exactly where you went wrong and gives you a new direction to go and research.*
- *I always appreciate any comments written on my assignment – it gives me confidence to continue on.*
- *If we do not know where we went wrong, how can we correct it?*

# FEEDBACK: CLEAR & COMPREHENSIBLE?

‘Always legible’ 22.8%

‘Always understood’ 34%



# Comments on theme: clarity

- *Some lecturers have got such messy writing I cannot read it.*
- *Their writing is terrible. Very messy. Can't understand 95% of what is written.*
- *Markers need to be careful about their writing as sometimes it can be hard to read which defeats the whole purpose of feedback – if the students can't read it or understand it then it serves no purpose.*

# ASKING FOR MORE FEEDBACK?

Yes, ask for it often, 25%

No, don't feel comfortable asking for it 53%

- I have been disappointed in the past and have felt very uncomfortable about questioning them.*
- I have had a few tutors who have been completely unapproachable and I hated asking them for assistance; in which cases I rarely ask for assistance.*
- I don't see the point. They have already said what they want to in the feedback itself.*
- One unit I didn't follow up as I disagreed with the comments very much but they were the only person running the course and I still had assessment papers to get marked – the power position there made it too uncomfortable to 'challenge' her position.*

# Timeliness of feedback?

**Assessment marked and returned before next submission**

**% N=304**

1. Always	24.6
2. Sometimes	45.7
3. Occasionally	18.7
4. Rarely	9.21
5. Never	1.64

# Comments on theme: timeliness

- *By the time you get the marked assignment back the feedback can seem a bit irrelevant because you've had so much other work you have submitted.*
- *They are meant to be, they are usually promised.*
- *Sometimes they aren't and that really irritates me, as I don't know how to approach the second piece of assignment.*

# Findings

- Considerable dissatisfaction with assessment feedback, especially legibility & timeliness
- Many believe work is marked hastily, and subjectively
- Not fully aware of the role of marking criteria
- Sample appears to be a highly motivated group of students
- Well-versed with working conditions of sessionals

# Conclusions

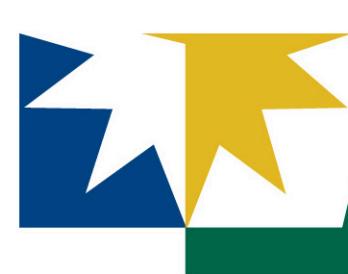
## Feedback

- should be timely,
- received before the next item is due
- should be constructive
- Should include concrete ways of improving student submissions
- be legible,
- Be given electronically

# Questions?

thank you from Anna and Kathy

([apotter@usc.edu.au](mailto:apotter@usc.edu.au))



University of the  
Sunshine Coast  
Queensland, Australia