



Enhancing the utilization of feedback by students

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The problem

Feedback on students' work should improve performance by "feeding-forward" into future work. However, in our one-year taught MSc we found the same comments had been made on sequential items of coursework for some students but with no apparent effort to address the issue. One student told us that, he often didn't read feedback carefully because if he had a poor grade he felt too bad about the mark to face reading about it, and a good grade was "job done". Some intervention was required to facilitate effective use of feedback by more students.

A solution? - short written reflections

Gomez & Osborne (2007) and Franks & Hanscomb (2012) both reported use of reflective approaches (a structured written exercise and a feedback viva); these were effective, however they were carried out only once for the respective courses and required significant amounts of time and effort from both staff and students. We wanted to apply reflection in a more ongoing way over several assessments during our MSc programme.

For the first four assessments during the initial four months of the programme in session 2012-13, following return of the graded work with feedback, each student was required to write a short "reflection" (about 400-500 words), considering the following points:

- What do I think was good about my performance?
- What aspects did the staff feedback highlight as good in relation to my report?
- What do I think might be improved for next time?
- What suggestions have been made in the staff feedback that I might apply in future work?

Students were asked to reflect on their approaches to the work as well as the completed report, and to generate an action plan.

Slight improvement in reported use of feedback by students

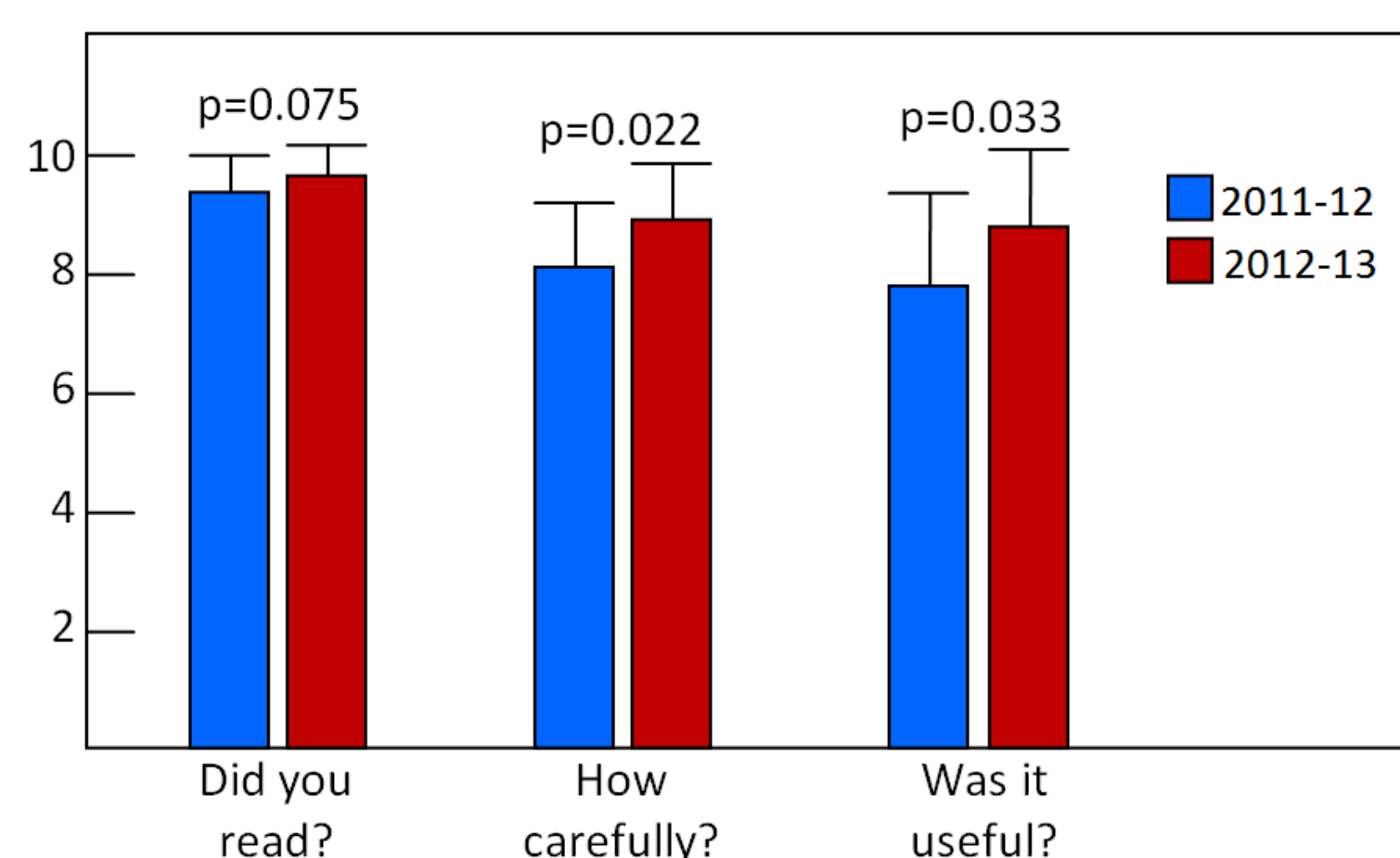


Figure 1: Reported use of feedback by students. Average values for student responses in session 2011-12 [prior to the use of reflections] (n=23) and 2012-13 (n=19) to the questions: "Did you read the written feedback on your assessed coursework? (Always = 10; Never = 0); How carefully did you read the written feedback on your assessed coursework? (Very carefully = 10; Not at all = 0); Do you think that written feedback was useful to help you improve your performance? (Very useful = 10; Not at all useful = 0). P values represent outcomes of independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test.

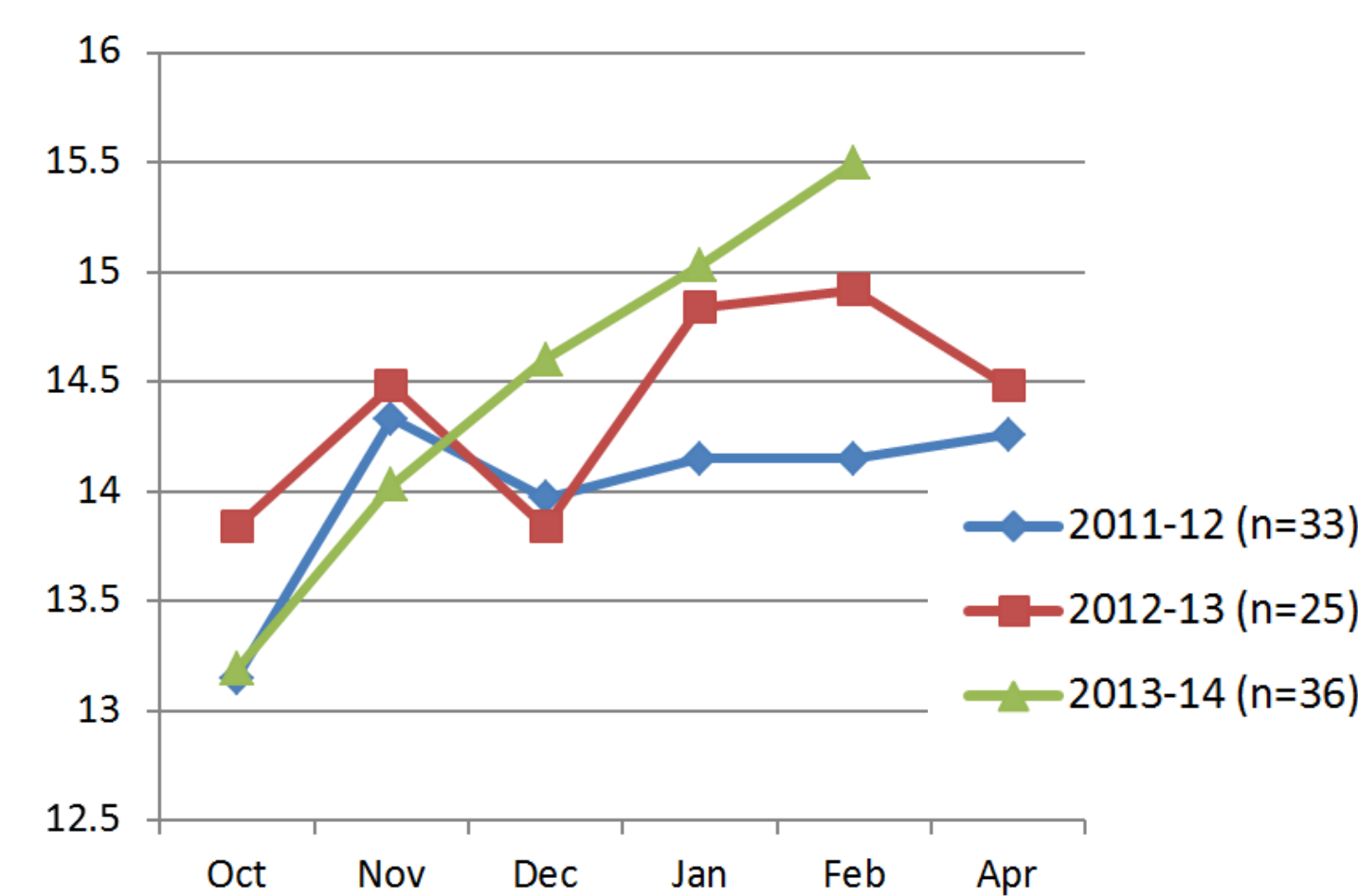
"Writing reflection on your feedback is a good way to ensure students have read and digested their feedback ... helps you ensure you put it into effect."

"It help us plan a strategy to improve future works."

"Although it took time from other assignments, reading the feedback and looking over past hand-ins can help see some things to improve you are not aware of."

References:
Franks B & Hanscomb S (2012) Learning through reflective dialogue: assessing the effectiveness of feedback vivas. *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, 12 (1). ISSN 1741-4164
Gomez S & Osborne R (2007) Enhancing student appreciation of written feedback on essay assignments. In S. Frankland (ed.), *Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Assessment: Deriving an Appropriate Model*, pp40-50
Taras M (2002) Using assessment for learning and learning from assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27(6): 501-510

Grades improve after introduction of reflections



"It helped me to remember which aspects I should focus on for the next assignment. And keep score on my improvement / see if I made improvement."

Figure 2: Grades in coursework. Average grades for each report in 2011-12 [prior to the use of reflection]; 2012-13 and 2013-14. Formative help was provided for October & November assignments; November assignment for item 2 was identical between the three years; February assignment was effectively identical for 2012-13 and three 2012 reports were randomised and included with 2013 reports as controls. Reflections were required on feedback from Oct, Nov, Dec and Jan assignments in 2012 and 2013.

In 2012-13 and 2013-14 the average grades were improved compared to 2011-12, particularly for the later assignments.

The best reflections correlate with the most improvement

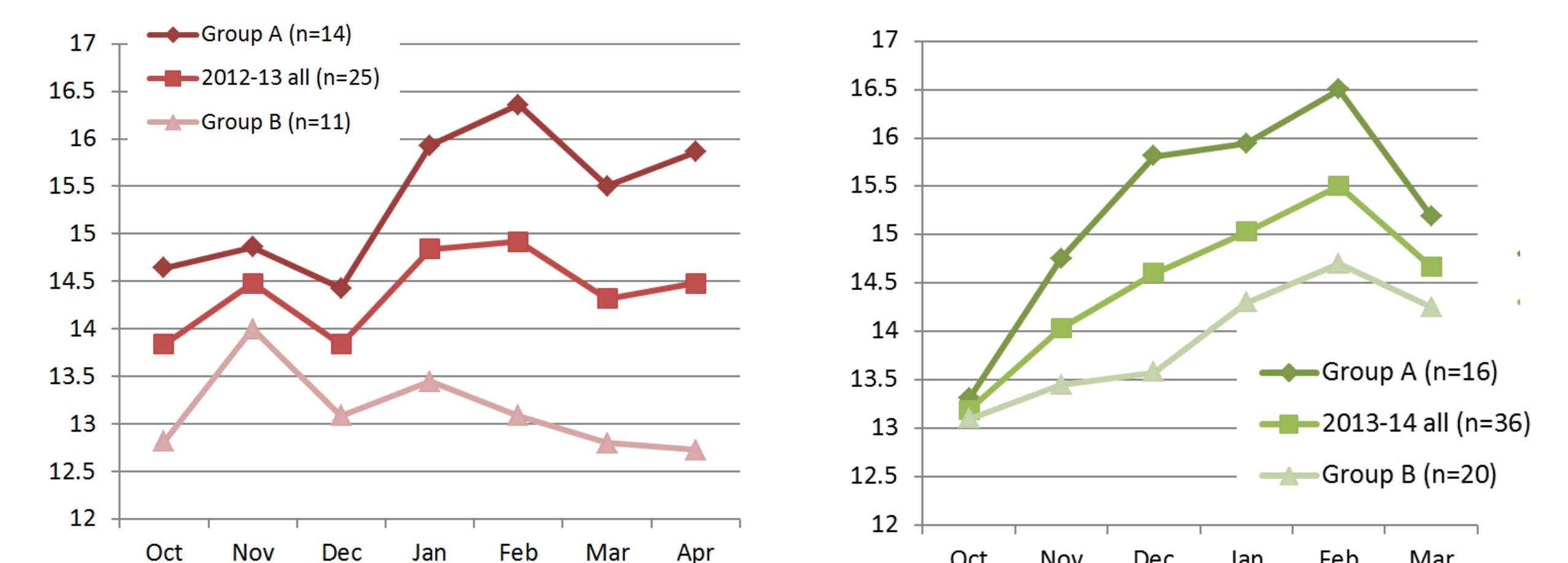


Figure 3: Better reflections correlate with greater improvement in grades. Students were split according to quality of reflections (Group A representing those with the best reflections), and average grades for each item of coursework were calculated. The March essays in 2012-13 & 2013-14 were perceived by students as particularly challenging (no equivalent assignment at this time in 2011-12).

The most insightful and thoughtful reflections correlated with the greatest improvement in grades (Figure 3). In 2012-13 the grades of the group with less good reflections ended up at about the same level they had been at the start of the year.

Changes for 2013-14

The data from 2012-13 demonstrating the importance of good reflections was highlighted to students at the start of 2013-14, to provide greater incentive for generating thoughtful reflections.

In 2012-13 the reflections were submitted together with the following coursework, which led to students giving them low priority; in 2013-14 the reflections had a separate submission.

In 2013-14 we also started the practice of withholding grades (Taras, 2002): reports were returned with feedback and grades only made available a few days later.

"I would not have taken as much notice of the comments otherwise."

Conclusions

The implementation of written reflections on coursework feedback has led to improvement in overall grades.

Emphasizing to students the importance of reflections and/or withholding grades until students have had a chance to digest feedback appears to have improved grades further.