The final examination: a squandered opportunity for feedback to students or a poor use of time?

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A final examination can form a significant component (as much as 70 per cent) of the total marks in many undergraduate university units, but specific feedback for students on their performance is not usually provided. This paper describes how individualised feedback was provided to students about their final examination in a second-year undergraduate unit. It also investigated students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of such feedback, in light of staff concerns about their ability to sustain the workload required to provide feedback to larger cohorts. Students expressed mixed views about the usefulness of final examination feedback, but most agreed that to be of value the feedback needed to be timely and accompanied by their examination paper. Preliminary findings from a follow-up study suggest that, while staff are willing to provide feedback on final examinations, restrictive university policies, large class sizes and lack of time inhibit them from doing so except upon request. Where individualised feedback is offered informally, staff report that few students appear to make use of this, except in preparation for supplementary assessment. This paper presents further results of this pilot study and discusses the value of providing feedback to students on final examinations, especially with regard to staff workload. It also explores inequities in the ways in which centrally scheduled final examination scripts are controlled and compares these with other assessment tasks.

Keywords: examination; feedback; summative
Theme: sustainable assessment practices and standards

Introduction

Assessment has long been recognised as an important curriculum component (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Joughin, 2010), and the provision of effective and timely feedback on assessment tasks can improve learning outcomes. Assessment tasks are often considered to be either formative or summative, although the definitions of these terms vary (Wininger, 2005). Assessment is considered formative if it can help students to improve in subsequent assessment tasks (Yorke, 2003). For many university staff and students, the summative final examination represents the demonstration of an integration of the learning outcomes for the unit (Williams & Wong, 2009), however, examination feedback has rarely been the focus of research.

Research questions and evaluation methods

The research questions posed in this paper grew from an action research model in which student responses to the provision of individualised feedback on final examination performance were monitored to decide whether or not to continue the time-consuming practice. A small group (n=10) of students from the human biology preclinical course was asked about their experiences and perceptions of final examination feedback in a second-year unit, Anatomy 231. Academic staff within the School of Biomedical Sciences were subsequently asked by email to indicate whether they had provided feedback on final examinations and, once those who had were identified (n=5), they were asked to participate in a short, semi-structured interview.

Preliminary findings

The possible range of feedback for the final examination in Anatomy 231 includes: the answers to the exam questions; general comments about how the class performed on individual questions; average scores and range for each question and personalised feedback ranking the student within the class range and commenting on specific areas of strength and weakness. This was emailed to individual students (n=30) following ratification of the marks at the Board of Examiners meeting. Therefore students received this feedback about four weeks after sitting the examination, when they no longer had access to the original paper (unless they arranged to come into the office to view it under supervision in line with university policy). At the time of emailing, most students replied positively, that feedback was useful and thanking the coordinator. However, when asked in more detail, students could not actually utilise the feedback because they couldn't recall their own answers to the exam questions. Most said this issue would have been addressed if they could view their examination paper while reading the feedback. Overall, few students reported receiving final examination feedback for a unit unless they approached the coordinator to review their examination script. Most students only do this for revision if they have been awarded a supplementary examination in that unit. Students thought they would be more likely to view samples of past examinations, rather than in review of their performance at the end of the semester, especially if they were not continuing with the same discipline area.

Staff from the School of Biomedical Sciences teach undergraduate units to students in their courses as well as teaching large service units to hundreds of students from a number of courses across the university. Staff responding to the email represented those teaching small (<60 students), medium (60–250 students) and large (>250 students) units. Most staff were happy to allow students to come to their office to view their paper and discuss their areas of weakness, but did not advertise this because they feared too many students would respond. Some had experience of students arguing about mark allocations, and this had discouraged them from offering exam feedback to individual students. Some staff members had provided examination result reports and sample answers to the examination online, but had not recorded the number of students viewing the page. Some staff believed that they were not permitted to disclose exam grades prior to their ratification at the Board of Examiners. However, the policies of the university do not specifically preclude staff from discussing examination results with students prior to their ratification at the

Board of Examiners, so it may be possible to provide information earlier to students while it is still relatively fresh in their minds.

Responses are still being collected from staff, and a more thorough survey is planned to ascertain the most appropriate methods. Any recent changes in the percentage of undergraduate units using final examinations and to the percentage of final grades contributed by final examinations will also be investigated.

Implications and conclusions

The preliminary findings of this study and a brief review of the literature suggest that feedback on assessment is concentrated on areas where staff and students believe their feedback will lead to improvement in skills or understanding. Factors such as large class sizes, short time frames between semesters, and students doing deferred examinations influence how much feedback on final examinations is provided to individual students and whole classes. Student perceptions of the usefulness of feedback was mixed within the small sample in this project and a survey is the next stage needed to see the same issues exist more broadly.

Curtin University policy on assessment states that students can review their assessment marks with the relevant unit coordinator and may then apply for a re-mark or lodge an appeal. It is therefore not surprising that many staff provide feedback only upon request. Rules about releasing examination scripts are also very strict. Therefore, whilst it may be possible to provide information about mark breakdown and averages to students immediately following their examination, the equity of the feedback received on different types of assessment tasks needs to be considered. Certainly the provision of feedback to large classes is time-consuming, so it is important to determine exactly what students gain from the feedback, and investigate how technology can streamline the provision of timely feedback (Williams & Wong, 2009). Communicating feedback to students about their examination performance must be efficient and equitable to all.

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