Perceptions of Quality in Staff-Student Written Feedback in Higher Education: A Case Study

Abstract
This paper reports on the results of an embedded, multiple case study that investigated the views of both lecturers and students on written staff-student feedback in three postgraduate programmes at one UK university. The study sought to uncover how 'quality written feedback' is perceived in the higher education environment under investigation. It found that tutors and students were broadly aligned in the features that they identified as constituting quality, which could be categorised within three dimensions: the affective or interpersonal, the orientational and the transformational. The findings suggest that feedback needs to incorporate each of these dimensions if it is to be perceived as being of good quality.

1. Background and literature review
The issue of feedback in higher education has over the last decade been subjected to considerable scrutiny from multiple perspectives. For example, it has been examined from the point of view of purpose and found to have a range of different functions, such as improving performance or increasing understanding; it has been analysed according to source, such as whether it is peer or staff feedback; and it has been identified as emanating from a range of mediums, including online. Many of these studies are individually incommensurable as they investigate different aspects of the phenomenon, but each has contributed to building our understanding, along the way revealing that feedback is complex, multifaceted, and mediated by numerous contextual variables.

According to Evans' (2013) thematic analysis of the recent research literature, 'there is a lack of work addressing feedback from the lecturer perspective… and postgraduate perspective' (2013, 76). The study reported in this paper addressed these lacunae through an examination of the perceptions of both staff and postgraduate students regarding a specific form of feedback: written feedback on postgraduate assignments. This particular type of feedback was selected because of its pre-eminence within higher education and its apparent importance to both staff and students, as noted in several studies or reports (e.g. Glover 2004; Sambell 2011).

Previous research on staff-student feedback has often been reported in terms of its 'quality', a characteristic which is also the focus of this paper. It is something that is identified not infrequently as absent but desired. For example, when students express dissatisfaction with the feedback they have received from their lecturers, it is often articulated as a concern about its quality, as in Ferguson (2011), Hounsell et al. (2008), and Yang and Carless (2013). The nature of quality staff-student feedback is, however, not a simple matter to establish. Different studies have identified a range of features that contribute towards quality: inter alia, clarity of the language used by staff (Nicol 2010; Sopina and McNeill 2015), timeliness of response (Bailey and Garner 2010; Scott 2014), sufficiency of detail (Sopina and McNeill 2015), consistency between feedback providers (Carless 2006), relevance of comments (Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014), and individuation of responses (Brown 2007; Holmes and Papageorgiou 2009). The features listed here, when present, are identified in many instances as increasing the extent to which students value their lecturers' feedback output.

'Quality staff-student feedback' might therefore be viewed from one perspective as feedback from staff that students value because it contains certain characteristics.

However, while there is undoubtedly a considerable body of evidence that feedback providers could enhance their practices, this would not be sufficient to achieve 'quality'. Some studies have shown that a focus on improving the quality of the output has led neither to higher satisfaction ratings on student surveys nor to increased student learning (Jonsson 2013; Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014). This makes it particularly important that any consideration of quality feedback should examine the whole feedback process rather than any single stage such as lecturer input (Nicol 2010; Wiliam 2011). This is supported by recent scholarship in the field, which has come to an understanding of feedback as being an interactive process. Such a view is aligned to a social constructivist perspective derived from Vygotskian theory. That is, learning from feedback is not a matter of transmission of knowledge from the tutor to the student, but is constructed in a process of social interaction. Feedback, therefore, is dialogic (Sanchez and Dunworth 2015; Boud and Molloy 2013; Nicol 2010; Orsmond et al. 2013; Tian and Lowe 2013). Thus, quality staff-student written feedback needs to take into account not only what the staff member produces but how the student engages with and responds to it.

A number of studies have been conducted that make this link, including some of those cited earlier. In Sopina and McNeill's (2015) study, for example, the detail in feedback output was used by students to 'help them understand their mark' (12). Holmes and Papageorgiou (2009) reported that students internalise feedback to help explain an awarded grade, while Scott (2014) noted that students used feedback input to track that they were on target to pass the course. In these studies, students are shown appropriating feedback to address issues of concern relating to their academic standing. Studies have also indicated that feedback may be used for affective purposes, Jonsson (2013, 69) commenting that students use feedback to 'motivate themselves'. Others, too, have pointed out the role of affect in students' responses to feedback (Evans 2013; Värlander 2008).

What students actually do as part of the feedback process is also an important consideration when it comes to identifying quality, if the ultimate educational aim of feedback is to support learning (Wiliam 2011) or promote achievement (Orsmond et al. 2013). Quality feedback has been associated with concepts that can lead to action, such as meaningfulness and usefulness, which can be interpreted as 'help[ing] fill the void between what was desired and what was achieved' (Brown 2007, 34), or effectiveness, which involves providing 'a tool to guide students through the learning process' (Sopina and McNeill 2015, 666). The seven principles of good feedback practice produced by Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006), which can also be viewed as leading to action, have been widely cited. They include helping to clarify good performance, facilitating reflection, delivering high quality information to students about their learning, encouraging dialogue about learning, promoting self-esteem and providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. Most of these principles primarily relate to the staff member, however, thereby emphasising one side of the feedback process.

There is, on the other hand, considerable evidence of a gap between the first stage of feedback output and any ultimate transformation resulting from the process. Some studies, such as those of Bailey and Garner (2010), Burke (2009) and Scott (2014) report that students take little action at all. Much of the recent literature on this is summarised in Evans (2013, 94), who notes that 'there are numerous examples of student inability to capitalize on

feedback opportunities by failing to make use of additional feedback offered'. Multiple explanations have been put forward for the inconsistencies observed in students' engagement with feedback, including students' educational and cultural backgrounds, learning styles, intellectual and emotional capacities, emotional state, and variability in training to understand the concept and function of feedback (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Evans 2013; Vickerman 2009). The indicators seem to be, therefore, that quality feedback, in this regard, is context and situation dependent, eschewing 'silver bullet' solutions.

Against this background, this paper reports on a specific set of results that relate to conceptions of quality feedback that were drawn from a more wide-ranging study on the nature of feedback in postgraduate coursework programmes. The study, which sought to add to our understanding of student and staff perceptions, knowledge and beliefs about feedback, had included, among the many items in the interview protocol, some questions about quality, articulated as 'good feedback'. However, as the data were analysed, concepts of quality became increasingly a point of interest. For the reasons identified above, the study focused on staff-student written feedback provided to postgraduate students on their assessed coursework assignments. Both staff and student perceptions were obtained in relation to a shared academic context, in anticipation that data from both 'sides' of the process could provide a more complete understanding of the phenomenon in question and a more rounded concept of quality than that obtained from a single source.

2. The study
The project took the form of an embedded, multiple case design (Yin 2009) that comprised three case studies within a single institution. Each case concerned a coursework master's programme in a separate discipline area: applied linguistics, education and social policy. The different fields were selected to enrich and strengthen the data that the study would generate, as it was not known in advance what feedback processes occurred across the different programmes. What was known was that assessment was through assignments rather than examinations, leading to an expectation that both formative and summative feedback would be involved. Specifically, assessment in each programme comprised a single written essay, the word count varying across programme from 3000 to 5000 words. The tasks involved responding to a written question, a text analysis and designing a plan for a research inquiry.

From each course three students and two tutors were selected as participants (although one tutor ultimately withdrew) making fifteen original participants in total. Each group of five constituted a case, the total number in each group being considered sufficient for triangulation purposes, particularly given that in two of the three courses the number of student participants represented almost half the total number enrolled. The semester-long classes from which the participants were selected did not have a large number of total enrolments: seven in the social policy course, eight in the education course and 45 in the applied linguistics course. For each case, the tutors were selected through convenience sampling and the students through random sampling to ensure a balance of participant numbers across cases, given the differing numbers of students enrolled on each course. As a small-scale, exploratory study, the project did not set out to differentiate perceptions as they might relate to gender, cultural and linguistic backgrounds or other demographic variables; the participants were therefore selected only on the basis of their willingness and availability to participate.

The staff participants were all experienced lecturers who were experts in the field relating to the unit of study they were teaching, with four having completed PhDs and one a master's

degree. One had four years of teaching experience in higher education, while all the others had more than ten, and all had completed their own postgraduate study in the UK. The student participants were taught by both of the staff members within their 'case', as illustrated in Figure 1 below.
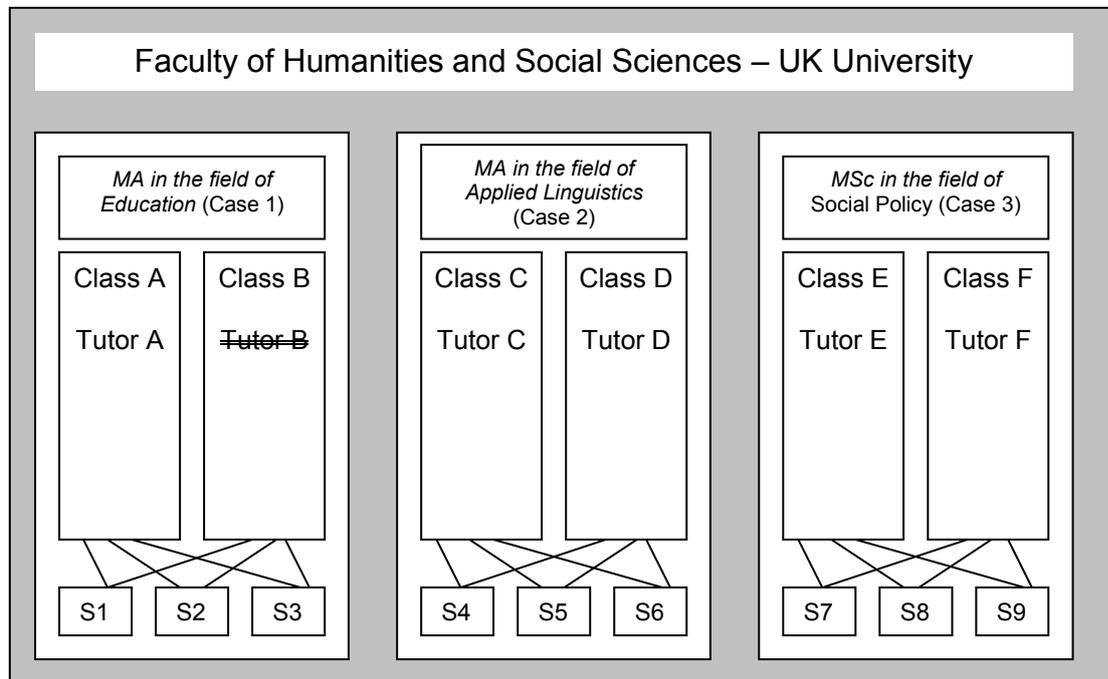

Figure 1: Methodological design (reproduced from Sanchez and Dunworth 2015).

There were two processes of data collection, designed to obtain rich and detailed input, as the purpose of the study was to obtain depth rather than breadth of responses. These consisted of two types of interview conducted with each participant. The first was a semi-structured background interview, conducted towards the beginning of the academic semester, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The purpose of this initial interview was to establish a participant profile in terms of educational background, professional experience and expectations and beliefs about feedback in higher education. The second was a stimulated recall interview of between 45 and 60 minutes, which took place at the end of the semester, no longer than two weeks after the final samples of written feedback used as a stimulus had been issued. The samples of written feedback were provided by the staff or student participant as the stimulus to commentary on that specific activity. Participants were free to provide any sample they wished, so the researchers played no role in the selection of stimulus material. From the stimulus samples and the comments obtained from the interviews, it appeared that written feedback was provided in multiple modes: for example, through formative and summative 'feedback forms', through comments in the margin of assignment outlines, on group presentation slides and in individual emails. The interviews were recorded and the resultant data transcribed. The use of multiple participants (each interviewed twice, each interview separated by a time span of at least four months) and methods facilitated data and methodological triangulation respectively, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The study followed the ethical guidelines published by the British Education Research Association, including the seeking of informed consent, explanation of the right to withdraw, and the use of de-identified data and pseudonyms for participants.

The data were analysed through a continuous process that involved descriptive and interpretative phases (Patton 2002). Codes were initially produced using key words and text chunks, from which themes were identified. These were then grouped into categories. Each case was first analysed separately and then subjected to a cross-case analysis. Data interpreted as relating to perceptions of quality were identified either directly, where the word 'quality' appeared in the interview data, or indirectly, in the analysis of statements that incorporated references to good practices or suggestions for improvements as perceived by the participants. The following conventions are used to identify the individuals and locate the information provided by the participants within the data set: pseudonyms followed by identification of whether they were student or staff participants (the latter identified by the term 'tutor'), and then (BI) if the data relate to the background interviews, or (SRI) if they refer to the subsequent stimulated recall interviews.

3. Findings and discussion

As the study was focused on postgraduate programmes, it was anticipated that the results might not reveal the kind of extreme findings that have been identified in a number of studies on feedback involving neophyte students (e.g. Beaumont, O'Doherty, and Shannon 2008), given that the student participants would already have experienced higher education at an undergraduate level and might have become acculturated to the kind of feedback experience they could expect, and that the staff participants were working with comparatively small groups of students. Indeed, it transpired that, in general, the perceptions of staff and students about the nature of quality feedback were broadly aligned, if differently emphasised, particularly when participants described desirable actions or activities.

From the results, three overarching themes were identified that encompassed the dimensions of participants' perceptions of quality feedback: the affective or interpersonal, the orientational and the transformational. Each of these contains a number of elements, as explained below.

3.1 The affective/interpersonal dimension

Affect, it has been argued, 'is the most neglected domain in higher education, although it is deemed to be the gateway to learning' (Evans 2013, 78). In this study, both students and staff emphasised its importance in quality feedback. One aspect of this was the capacity of feedback to increase confidence. This was particularly associated with positive comments being made about students' strengths along with suggestions for improvement. One student commented: 'it can be really positive and boost your confidence a little ... one positive comment can make a difference in your whole mindset of how you approach your courses' (Rose, student, BI). Another student, Julie, concurred. As she explained: 'sometimes you don't realise what your strength is ... if somebody told me this is your strength, I'd get more confident' (Julie, student, BI). Tutor Claire also identified this as good practice: 'you can support students ... by being as positive as you can ... trying to talk about the progress they've made to date and make them feel as if they are moving forward' (Claire, tutor, SRI). Along with confidence or esteem, praise was also seen as increasing motivation:

> ... by providing feedback you may motivate the students by recognizing what they have done well ... you're contributing to their development, in the sense that you're stimulating them to increase their engagement with their subject (Daniel, tutor, BI).

While confidence and motivation were positive elements that participants believed should be encouraged, criticism was also acknowledged as playing an essential role in quality feedback.

At the same time, a number of student participants argued that it was possible to avoid a negative emotional impact from this by careful control of the manner in which it was presented. One thought this could be achieved by highlighting strengths at the end of feedback comments: 'For me it's always better to finish with positive comments to make sure I won't get depressed,' (Amy, student, SRI). Another participant, on the other hand, preferred comments on strengths to come first to make the subsequent criticism easier to digest: 'In China if you want to give suggestions for improvement, you give a red date, a fruit, first ... it will make criticism not that difficult to cope with' (Lucy, student, SRI). These preferences, which differ only in order, can be seen as variations on the 'feedback sandwich' approach or the 'sugar-coated pill' metaphor, in which the student is 'warmed up' with positive feedback so that criticism becomes more palatable (see Molloy, Borrell-Carrió, and Epstein 2013, 60-62). Others commented on the need for staff to strike a respectful tone, and were disconcerted by what they saw as excessive frankness: 'I was like in shock by the language she [the lecturer] used ... I remember the first line was 'this does not make sense at all' ... I was expecting more polite language' (Julie, student, SRI); 'negative things should be pointed out in polite language because it's good if nobody feels offended' (Amy, student, BI). Some staff participants also raised this point. Daniel felt that staff should not be rude, and Troy stated that to avoid sounding personally critical, he would write what he called 'de-personalising language', comments that referred to a 'piece of work' rather than its author, because, as he stated, 'somebody is more than their essay' (Troy, tutor, BI).

These points of view accord with one of the principles of good feedback practice identified by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006): that it promotes motivation and self-esteem. At the same time, it has been noted in the literature that praise may not always be helpful and so has to be carefully managed. It may otherwise have a diminishing impact on learning and performance, since it 'directs the learner's attention to "self", which distracts from the task and consequently from learning' (Shute 2008, 178).

A further aspect of the affective/interpersonal dimension of participants' perceptions was that some students expressed a need to feel that their lecturers cared, or that there existed some kind of relationship or reciprocity. Lucy, for example, stated: 'the purpose is to make the student feel that the tutor cares about them and their progress… so long as you feel someone is watching you, you always want to do better' (Lucy, student, BI). Another student stated that comments in the margins of essays 'show you that they [tutors] actually looked at your work… this shows, OK, you made an effort but we also then make an effort and look at it, look at every sentence' (Brie, student, SRI). One lecturer, too, suggested that feedback should be 'an open, interactive, social relationship between humans' (Troy, tutor, SRI).

In short, affect and interpersonal relationships were perceived as being integral to quality feedback, an aspect of the whole process and clearly linked to learning. As Yang and Carless (2013, 290) have pointed out: 'The management of emotions can support relationships, the uptake of feedback and promote positive learning dispositions'.

3.2 The orientational dimension
This dimension relates to the perception that quality feedback has a role in enabling students to orientate or position themselves within their academic environment. In other words, participants expressed the view that quality feedback should induct students into the demands and level of the course, provide them with a sense of their place within it, to help them see themselves in relation to others, and give them a sense of their lecturers' expectations. One tutor, for example, emailed students a unit report that listed the mean mark awarded for

assignments and the standard deviation, so that individual students could 'get a feel for where they are in relation to the class' (Troy, tutor, BI). This participant also provided students with exemplar assignments. Similarly, it was noted by another tutor that feedback should 'provide a summary of the level of the essay in comparison to other students and the assessment criteria' (Daniel, tutor, BI).

Student participants shared this perception that quality feedback would assist them in orienting to the expectations of lecturers and the demands of the course. Tensions arose when differing lecturer expectations appeared to be conveyed to students. This was particularly problematic when the staff were teaching on the same component of the course. From the feedback comments she received, for example, Lucy felt that one lecturer had lower expectations than another who was more 'demanding and straightforward' (Lucy, student, SRI). Consistency was not only a concern of students. One staff participant explained that when she was cross-marking, she read the first marker's feedback to check that the two markers were aligned; as she put it 'singing from the same song sheet' to provide students with a consistent message (Janet, tutor, BI). This issue of consistency between staff members is also something that has been identified in the research literature, often because it has been found to be lacking (Brown 2007; Orsmond et al. 2013).

Participants also expressed a concern that quality feedback should assist students with regard to orientation to the assignment tasks: that they had understood them, that they had selected suitable ways of addressing them, and that their work was appropriately aligned to the curriculum and relevant genre. Student Vivian noted that she read the exemplars posted in the course website so that she could see if she was going 'in the right direction' (Vivian, student, SRI), Rose indicated that good feedback should provide students with information on the suitability of their approach to the assignment task (Rose, student, BI), and Julie expressed a desire for formative feedback to indicate whether she was 'on the right track' (Julie, student, BI). One lecturer also used this expression in relation to formative feedback, asserting that students needed 'to be reassured quite regularly that they are on the right track' (Claire, tutor, SRI).

These two aspects of the orientational dimension - person directed and course content directed - were interlinked when it came to the issue of grades accompanying written feedback, which was a topic on which there was some disagreement between participants. Most student participants were concerned to receive a grade and in two of the three programmes in the study were frustrated by the absence of one with the final summative written feedback, as was standard practice. Lucy, for instance, claimed that the uncertainty of this had a negative impact on students' emotions. She explained: 'there was one or two weeks between the final feedback and the mark and it's a really difficult period … so we all went to check if there is anything [in the feedback] indicating that we didn't pass so we can prepare the re-submission'(Lucy, student, SRI). Nancy, on the other hand, felt that the grade 'doesn't really say anything about you, it just says about percentages of your work, it's just a mark so it's not really useful … The grade doesn't provide information about what you did well and what you did not' (Nancy, student, SRI).

Staff participant perceptions also differed on this issue. Some were unsympathetic to the issue of grades, and did not associate them with quality, in some instances implying an association with credentialism and instrumentality. Claire argued that students just wanted to know if they had passed and were not responsive to feedback (Claire, tutor, SRI). Alice suggested that lecturers were in a 'straightjacket', with students demanding feedback that would improve

their grades (Alice, tutor, SRI). Troy stated that staff were increasingly becoming trainers rather than academics, the impact on feedback being that he was simply telling students what they had to do to pass or get a good mark (Troy, tutor, BI). Such comments seem to suggest that, for some staff, there was an association between students' expressed desire for such grade-related feedback and their lack of engagement with, or sense of responsibility for, their own learning. It should be noted, however, that some practices undertaken by certain lecturers described above, such as providing students with the mean mark and standard deviation, appear inconsistent with this position, and reinforce the complexity of the issue. Janet, on the other hand, expressed the belief that '[the tutor's advice] should improve what they get out of their master's because I should be directing them to get a better mark and get their qualification' (Janet, tutor, BI).

3.3 The transformational dimension
The third dimension of quality feedback as perceived by participants in this study was its capacity to promote transformation; in other words, to support learning and change. Within this dimension, participants identified four desirable end points to quality feedback: a greater level of understanding, an increased capacity for reflection, improved academic performance, and increased autonomy. These end points are explained in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Several staff participants pointed out that, ultimately, feedback could have an impact within but also beyond the courses the students were undertaking by increasing their understanding and critical reflection. One tutor commented that feedback should 'give pointers to knowledge seekers, the students, in order to help them to learn how to think about problems' and added that the focus was 'more about a way of thinking rather than about performance in a particular test' (Troy, tutor, BI). Claire perceived feedback to have a wider role as a 'critical reflective check on ourselves as learners' which represented 'the basics of moving ourselves forward as learners' (Claire, tutor, BI), thus referring to a more generic and lasting effect on learners. This perspective was one shared by student Carrie.

> I don't just sit still. I get involved ... first of all I reflect upon it, see if I agree… feedback is a way of developing your own capacities and your own thoughts and arguments ... you learn to understand others' visions and this is such an important thing in the world ... that is something I want to use for my professional life and my studies (Carrie, student, BI).

When it came to academic performance, participants identified a number of technical elements associated with quality feedback, which were in line with the findings of several other studies, as identified earlier in this paper. For example, both staff and students commented on such issues as timeliness, specificity and personalisation of feedback comments. Many staff and students made the observation that feedback input, in order to be useful, had to be provided at a time when it could be acted on: prior to the submission of a final version of an assignment or the end of a programme of study; and that it should be directed at individual students' developmental needs.

Additionally, however, students and staff indicated that learning took time, and that quality feedback was therefore an ongoing process rather than an event. This has also been noted in the research literature (Price et al. 2013). One staff participant argued that tutors should provide 'constant, permanent, ongoing tuition' which might help students prepare for an assignment task (Alice, tutor, BI). Daniel explained how providing several instances of feedback input supported student learning:

... because this is not the only piece of feedback that they receive in the course they will be able to see ... problems, issues, etcetera, that are repeated across different pieces of feedback and I think that will direct their attention towards that particular aspect and they will start to see different things like well, how can I more generally address this lack of criticality? Or how can I address this problem with the structure? (Daniel, tutor, SRI).

Student Amy highlighted the importance of feedback input, and the student's reaction to it, extending over the entire duration of the course:

... it's useful to get something that's throughout the course because if students get feedback only at the end of the course it's like a cold shower, so it's better if they get feedback continuously from the beginning and they can develop their performance and assignments (Amy, student, BI).

The role of quality feedback in promoting student autonomy was identified as important primarily by staff participants. While there was not a consensus on how this might be achieved, participants tended to stress that more help from staff was not the answer. Janet, for instance, stated that students wanted to be 'spoon-fed' in expecting their lecturers to find resources for them, which she did not think was appropriate at postgraduate level. She felt that higher education had been 'dumbed down' and that 'though autonomy has been a buzz-word in education for ages, students are becoming less and less autonomous' (Janet, tutor, BI). Troy was concerned about the kind of feedback practices that were increasingly being demanded, and asked:

If the only thing we have learnt as a training is how to respond to pre-set questions, what kind of learning is that when you are challenged with a new question? How can you generate a new question if the only thing you have done is repeat continuously, forever, *ad infinitum*, whatever what was already written? That is not the purpose of education (Troy, tutor, BI).

Claire expressed the belief that the onus should be on students to be pro-active in their use of feedback input, and explained that she conveyed this to students by finishing off her feedback input comments with the statement 'this is just some thoughts for you but you can do with it whatever you want to do with it' (Claire, tutor, SRI).

Responses from student participants were more mixed. Some, such as Carrie and Lucy, envisaged feedback as dialogic, expecting to develop their own capacities and to 'grow while dialoguing with another person about your work' (Carrie, student, BI). Some of the comments from students, though, suggested a level of dependency and uncertainty about how to progress. Julie took no action on the feedback input she received from her lecturer as she found the frequent use of questions confusing, and was unsure whether these represented advice on issues that 'need to be fixed' or if they were simply suggestions (Julie, student, SRI). Vivian was unsure how to improve her work beyond making the changes suggested by her tutor (Vivian, student, SRI), and Rose assumed that sections of her work which did not attract feedback comments were fine (Rose, student, SRI). Their comments support the argument that training is necessary to provide students with the resources required to interpret and respond to tutor feedback input (O'Donovan, Price, and Rust 2004; Sadler 2010). The staff participant responses indicate that a balance needs to be struck, since 'too much explicit guidance may result in student dependence and limited thinking' (Evans 2013, 89). This

suggests that staff might also benefit from some form of professional development that could assist them to provide appropriate guidance while simultaneously promoting autonomy.

3.4 Conceptualising quality staff-student feedback

The participants in this study were postgraduate students and their lecturers from three coursework master's degree programmes. At least for these participants, it was an understanding of feedback in the current holistic sense that informed their reported beliefs and opinions about the nature of quality feedback. Collectively, there were a number of perceptions about quality written feedback that they had in common: that it should be seen as a process that incorporated a number of stages that went beyond the initial lecturer input; that it comprised certain characteristics which fell into three categories: affect, orientation to the learning environment and transformational learning; and that it had certain positive outcomes relating to these features. While some tendencies within groups were identified, individual staff and student participants did not always share the same perspectives on how quality could be achieved, even when they agreed on what it was, either within or between the staff and student groupings, further demonstrating that feedback is a multifaceted and complex construction that lends itself to multiple understandings.

A number of frameworks for feedback have been devised within the scholarly and research literature, according to the perspectives from which it has been examined. Yang and Carless (2013), for example, proposed the 'feedback triangle', which describes the interplay between the cognitive attributes to be cultivated, the structural elements such as policies, procedures and resources, and the social-affective dimension that incorporates relationships and affective responses to feedback. Rae and Cochrane (2008) produced a heuristic model of effective written feedback that was based on findings from student input and included items such as feeding forward, self-management, consistency, personalisation, guidance and discussion. Some of these items, such as the need for consistency and personalisation, were also replicated in the study described in this paper. Evans (2013) created what she termed the 'feedback landscape', which emphasised the multiple mediator variables that can impact on feedback, including gender, personality, previous learning experiences, beliefs about learning and cognitive styles. Each of these, along with those explicated in many other studies, has informed our understanding and are valuable, but they do not share the perspective examined in this paper. What makes this study unique is the focus on and identification of the perceptions of staff and students about the elements that they believed contributed to quality staff-student feedback. For the individuals in the study, there was variation in the extent to which any one of those perceptions might be emphasised, but this was not an issue because for this small-scale, interpretative study the numerical strength of the views expressed was not a key concern. It is the construction of conceptions of quality feedback, identified through the analysis of joint data provided by staff and students within a single organisational unit that contributes to and moves forward our understanding of the phenomenon of feedback.

A conceptual model of quality staff-student feedback at postgraduate level, derived from the findings from this study, is presented below.
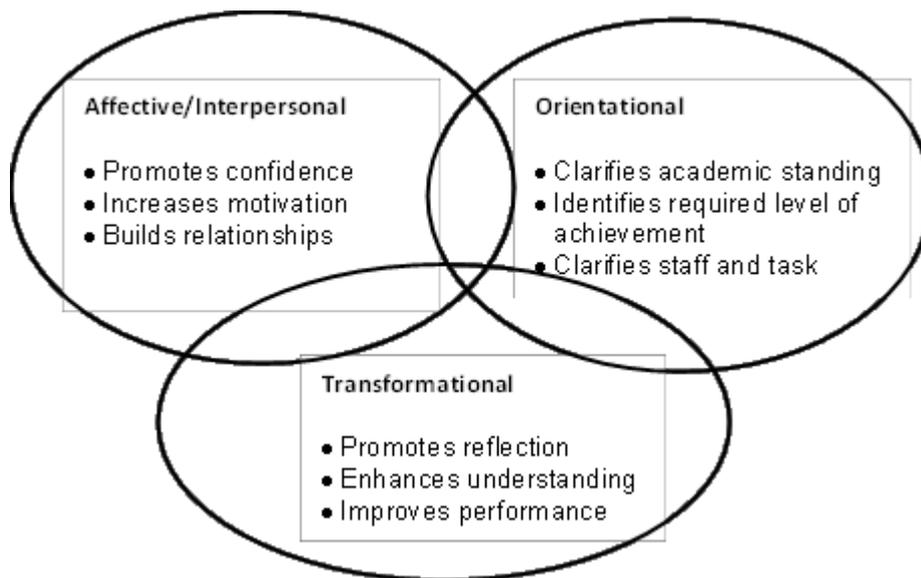
Figure 2: Conceptual model of quality staff-student feedback.

The three dimensions of quality feedback, derived from the data on staff and student perceptions, are conceived of as overlapping, in recognition that the ideas expressed by participants in this study did not refer simply to one dimension, that participants did not necessarily perceive the dimensions as separate, and did not appear to prioritise one dimension over another. Most data from individual participant interviews included comments about all dimensions of feedback, thus indicating that any one dimension within this model is insufficient without the others. Although they have been described separately in this paper for the purposes of clarity, the co-existence of these different dimensions is inherent to conceptions of quality feedback. This is exemplified in the extended comment from Rose:

> It lets me know where I stand, what I need to do to get better, if I'm needing some kind of standard set by the professor or the curriculum ... at the same time it can be really positive and boost your confidence a little (Rose, student, BI).

4. Conclusion

The intention of this paper was not to reflect on the purpose of feedback, as this is a question that has been comprehensively addressed in the recent research literature. It was, rather, to identify the perceptions of both groups of participants in the feedback process, staff and students, about the nature of quality staff-student written feedback, in order to shed further light on the value of the process in its entirety. The study thus took a holistic perspective and did not seek to differentiate between individuals or sub-groups by introducing factors for comparison such as gender or cultural background. This is something that might be considered in future research into this issue.

The findings from this study indicated that there was an overall consistency between academic staff and students regarding the nature of quality feedback. From this it can be surmised that for the participants in this study, quality feedback can be described as a process in which staff input and support that is optimal for the context and situation is actively engaged with, appropriated, and used productively by students to enhance their educational experience from a number of different dimensions. This was a small-scale investigation, conducted within three postgraduate programmes at one institution, and the findings cannot

be generalised beyond the particular study, but they are aligned in many of the details with outcomes from other recent research studies. The evidence is mounting that 'staff-student feedback' is a process that incorporates multiple dimensions within an interactive educational environment, and that all participants in the process of staff-student feedback need to be engaged and responsive if it is to be of high quality.

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