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1 **Undergraduate student perceptions of assessment and feedback practice: fostering agency and**
2 **dialogue**

3

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14

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16

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18

19 **Abstract**

20

21 Assessment and feedback practices sit at the heart of education and the student experience. This
22 paper reports on undergraduate perceptions of assessment and feedback in the Department of
23 Geography at King's College London, UK. Twenty-eight first and second year students across six focus
24 groups provided comments on their understanding of feedback, their feedback experiences, and
25 what they felt could be improved. It was clear that students desired feedback that would help them
26 improve summative performance, but were unsure of how best to use it and consequently had high
27 expectations that led to dissatisfaction. Particular concern was expressed about marking and
28 feedback consistency, and the inherent variation in practice they experienced. Many comments
29 indicated a lack of student agency, which may reflect the power relations that students find
30 themselves in within their community of practice. Finding ways of fostering agency and improving
31 dialogue over perceptions and expectations are suggested to be important steps in improving
32 assessment and feedback practice, and student satisfaction.

33

34

35 **Introduction**

36

37 The provision of feedback on assessment is essential for the educational development and
38 performance of undergraduate students, and a central part of the teacher-student relationship that
39 sits within the 'communities of practice' developed in any given institutional context (Higgins,
40 Hartley and Skelton, 2002; Crimmins et al. 2016). The prime intention of feedback is to facilitate
41 higher cognitive thinking (or 'deep learning') and therefore improvement of one or more aspects of
42 a student's education; for example, of understanding, ability, skills, or performance (e.g. Dawson et
43 al. 2018). Yet ensuring that feedback is both effective and efficient can be challenging, particularly in
44 situations where assessors are faced with limited time to mark and provide feedback, and where
45 students seem to lack agency in engaging with feedback. Research has consistently identified that
46 assessment is central to the student experience, is something that students are particularly focused
47 on, and that there is a substantial appetite for feedback on assessment that sits alongside high levels
48 of frustration and disappointment with it (Price et al. 2011). This results in-part from problems with
49 the content and clarity of feedback, the tone used by assessors, and the timing of feedback, with
50 those students disappointed by the community of practice in which they find themselves often
51 disengaging from the feedback process (Price et al. 2011).

52

53 For geographers in particular, assessment and feedback presents several challenges. The discipline is
54 diverse by nature, both in subjects and methods (Bonnett, 2008; Adams et al. 2014) and as such a
55 broad range of different assessment types might be used to address the learning aims and objectives
56 of any given course or module. Indeed, in the UK, the QAA Geography Benchmark Statement (2014),
57 lists eight broad types of assessment (essays/reports, creation of online resources, oral
58 presentations, practical work, examinations, reflective learning journals, research dissertations and
59 projects, and work-based assessments) that may be encountered within a typical geography
60 undergraduate programme; each of which may then be broken down into more specific assessment
61 types (essays for example can include, among other things, press releases, consultancy reports,
62 briefing papers, annotated bibliographies, and article critiques). Geography is also inherently
63 interdisciplinary, covering many aspects of both environment and society, and although such
64 interdisciplinarity is often celebrated and increasingly efforts are made to teach across the
65 environment/society nexus, units of teaching and learning (as well as research) generally remain
66 separated into 'physical' and 'human' domains, based on whether they focus more on environment
67 or society respectively. This can (though does not always) create a separation of preferred
68 assessment types and expectations, which can potentially confuse and disappoint students if not

69 communicated well. Improvement of assessment practice is therefore especially important for
70 geographers.

71

72 There is increasing recognition that the effective provision and utilisation of feedback is a two-way
73 process that requires agency (the capacity to act with a given environment or practice, and which is
74 situated within power relations) on the part of both assessors and students (e.g. Gravett and
75 Kinchin, 2018). Much of this agency will depend on how both parties perceive and understand their
76 assessment and feedback practices. Without alignment of perceptions and expectations, practice
77 will inevitably continue to be ineffective and a source of dissatisfaction for both parties. This paper
78 explores how students perceive the assessment and feedback practice they participate in, and how
79 they understand and utilise agency within this practice. We do this by drawing on the findings of a
80 series of focus groups conducted with second and final-year undergraduate students in the
81 Geography department of a UK Higher Education Institution (King's College London). Our intention is
82 to develop a better understanding of our assessment and feedback practice, both to improve our
83 educational provision and to contribute to similar efforts that must be taking place elsewhere in the
84 geographical education community, and more widely.

85

86 *Assessment and feedback within UK Higher Education*

87

88 Within the UK higher education system, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are required to have
89 rigorous protocols in place to ensure a high standard of practice. The Higher Education sector is
90 heavily scrutinised and competitive. Most undergraduate degrees in England (where the majority of
91 HEIs are based) cost £9,250 per year to study (in 2018), which is the maximum that the UK
92 government allows HEIs to charge. The marketisation of Higher Education (see Molesworth, Scullion
93 and Nixon, 2010) has led to increasing expectations for accountability and transparency in terms of
94 educational provision, and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS), an independent regulatory
95 public body reporting to the UK Government Department for Education, in 2017. As a result of this,
96 and as the introduction of student fees has led to HEIs obtaining most of their revenue directly from
97 students (rather than government funding), UK HEIs are increasingly scrutinising the quality of their
98 educational provision, to ensure that they are offering education of the highest possible quality and
99 therefore best able to compete in the sector. Assessment and feedback practices, as central
100 components of quality education, are increasingly a subject of scrutiny and debate as HEIs seek to
101 establish best practice. At the very least, this is a positive development as it has created an agenda
102 for understanding and improvement of assessment and feedback at many HEIs.

103

104 Assessment and feedback standards are publicly scrutinised and evaluated in the UK in several ways.
105 In particular, they are part of the undergraduate National Student Survey (NSS), an annual survey
106 completed by final year undergraduate students across the country that looks at student satisfaction
107 with the HEI course they have taken, the results of which are published in national league tables.
108 This in turn forms a part of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), which
109 is a periodic government exercise that assesses teaching excellence and student outcomes (e.g.
110 employment) at UK HEIs, and awards quality indicators (gold/silver/bronze ratings) that may
111 ultimately (in the future) link to student fees. Within the NSS, the section on assessment and
112 feedback is consistently amongst the lowest scored across the sector (Williams and Kane, 2008),
113 meaning that fewer students rate themselves as 'satisfied' with their assessment and feedback
114 experience in comparison to, for example, the quality of teaching they have experienced.

115

116 This is particularly relevant to Geography; a subject that generally scores relatively high in
117 satisfaction (compared to other disciplines, e.g. RGS-IBG, 2019), but still often performs low (and so
118 even lower than expected, given other areas of satisfaction) for assessment and feedback (Office for
119 Students, 2019). This may be linked to the broad range of assessment types and differing
120 expectations from physical/human geography assessors as noted earlier, and much discussion has
121 taken place regarding ways to improve student satisfaction (e.g. Tuck, 2012; Holmes, 2015), with
122 NSS emerging as a driver of discourse in some cases (Kinchin and Francis, 2017). NSS satisfaction
123 scores are in general lower in London compared to elsewhere, and data from the Office for Students
124 (2019) suggests that in many cases, London-based institutions have particularly low assessment and
125 feedback scores. For the Geography undergraduate programmes across London institutions that are
126 members of the prestigious Russell Group, assessment and feedback scores for 2019 were a mean of
127 8.7% lower than overall satisfaction for each respective institution (BA and BSc Geography
128 programmes from King's College London, London School of Economics and Political Science,
129 University College London, and Queen Mary University London). This performance is despite the
130 commitment of Russell Group institutions to both 'the very best research and an outstanding
131 teaching and learning experience' (Russell Group, 2019). These points suggest a need to better
132 understand assessment and feedback practice in order to ensure that students are satisfied with
133 their educational experience, particularly within the Russell Group.

134

135 Notwithstanding the limitations of such a survey (e.g. Cheng and Marsh 2010; Bell and Brooks 2018)
136 and the problems of associating student satisfaction (rather than e.g. outcomes) with educational

137 quality, the incorporation of such metrics increases pressure on universities and academic staff to
138 improve their quality of assessment and feedback. Furthermore, the consistently lower satisfaction
139 ratings in this section of the NSS suggest a nationwide mismatch between the perspectives and
140 expectations of assessors giving feedback and students receiving it.

141

142 This situation has led to significant frustration on the part of HEIs as they try to address student
143 satisfaction whilst maintaining rigour of practice. As Kinchin et al. (2016, p.4) note: “[there is an]
144 apparent impotence of universities to address students’ on-going dissatisfaction with assessment
145 feedback practices, exacerbated by a lack of agentic engagement on the part of the students, to
146 which institutional responses are typically ‘just do more and do it faster’, as if increasing the dosage
147 of an inappropriate medicine will eventually become a cure.” Such approaches increase pressure on
148 academic staff with seemingly little benefit to students, and so it could be argued that a shift in
149 assessment and feedback practice is needed. Such a shift must have as its basis an evidenced
150 understanding of undergraduate student perceptions and expectations. It is intended that this paper
151 should contribute this collective understanding, and therefore to improvement in practice.

152

153 *Institutional context: undergraduate assessment and feedback practice in the Department of*
154 *Geography, King’s College London*

155

156 The Department of Geography at King’s College London (KCL) is interdisciplinary; in their first year,
157 undergraduate students study both human and physical geography and then choose whether to
158 follow the human-geography focused Bachelor of Arts (BA) or physical-geography focused Bachelor
159 of Science (BSc) degree path. Students can expect to take an average of c.29 pieces of coursework
160 (i.e. non-exam) assessment during their three-year degree programme, and overall coursework in its
161 various forms comprises 78% of assessment across the BA and BSc programmes (Table 1). The vast
162 majority of this assessment fulfils both summative and formative roles; summative because the
163 assessment carries marks that count towards module grades and the final degree classification, and
164 formative because the essays are intended to build knowledge that is useful for future coursework
165 assessments and academic practice more generally, by signalling disciplinary and curriculum-specific
166 expectations of assessment (such as writing and referencing styles, essay structure, forms of critical
167 engagement, and methods and their application).

168

169 The Department has no formal differentiation between BA/BSc or human/physical assessments or
170 their marking criteria – instead, individual types of assessment have their own marking criteria

171 (Exam, Essay, Report, Proposal, Briefing, Visual Presentation, Oral Presentation, Code, Build and
172 Dissertation). Historically, the relation of marking criteria to specific types of assessment may have
173 been unclear – a recent internal review found that 39 different labels were used to describe what
174 might broadly be called ‘coursework’ (e.g. essay, report, policy brief, project report, mini project,
175 course paper, case study report, review essay, etc.). As a result of this review, the 10 assessment
176 types noted above were decided upon, and all labels revised to match these, with their own marking
177 criteria (which were modifications of generic College criteria). A breakdown of these different
178 assessment types across all modules in the BA/BSc programmes for 2018/19 is given in Table 1.

179

180 Feedback on these assessments must meet several objectives and is not targeted solely at students
181 but also at academic colleagues who may be involved in second marking activities and, ultimately,
182 quality assurance governors within and without the university itself. As such, the feedback is part of
183 the rigorous moderation procedures prevalent at UK HEIs that have been critiqued by Bloxham
184 (2009) for the constraints they impose on assessment practice, and the extra burden they add to
185 markers. Feedback must: (1) justify the mark or grade given, usually by appropriate reference to
186 marking criteria, to students, internal scrutinisers (e.g. assessment boards, Quality Assurance) and
187 external examiners; (2) provide sufficient guidance to students to allow them to improve their
188 understanding, abilities and/or performance, particularly in relation to thematically and structurally
189 similar assessments undertaken in future; (3) be constructed using appropriate language and tone;
190 and (4) be delivered in a timely fashion. Of these objectives, (2) is the element that is most
191 important to students and the part that arguably requires most alignment of perspectives and
192 agency from both assessors and students.

193

194 All coursework in the department is submitted electronically via an online Moodle platform (King's E-
195 learning And Teaching Service, or KEATS). Marks and feedback are returned to students within four
196 weeks (two weeks for selected first-year tutorial modules), also electronically. Assessors provide
197 typed feedback that gives overall comments on the assessment, as well as specific strengths and
198 areas for improvement in (1) substance & content, (2) structure & argument and (3) presentation &
199 quality of expression. These categories are considered to be relatively distinct, to map onto marking
200 criteria and also to illustrate broad areas students might focus on for future improvement.

201

202 Students are encouraged to follow-up feedback with staff during drop-in ‘advice and support’
203 (office) hours, and a statement to this effect, with a link to staff advice and support hours, is part of
204 the feedback template used on every piece of coursework. Students are also advised to download a

205 copy of each of their marked assessments (with feedback) so that they have a record of it, as once
206 modules 'roll over' to the next academic year on the online platform, essays from previous years are
207 no longer visible to students. Creation of such a portfolio ensures that they can participate in
208 'metafeedback' during personal tutor meetings, in which their portfolio of assessments can be
209 discussed with their personal tutor and advice offered on areas where they might be able to improve
210 systematically.

211

212

213 **Methods**

214

215 To explore student perceptions of assessment and feedback practice, we conducted six focus groups
216 with undergraduate Geography students at KCL. Focus groups are common in education research,
217 particularly when the focus is on recurrent experiences (such as assessment and feedback), and
218 when an essentially exploratory, non-quantitative approach to perceptions and opinions is required
219 (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996). In the 2017/18 academic year, there were 441 students
220 enrolled in the department's undergraduate programmes. From these we invited 36 students to
221 participate, with 28 ultimately participating. The focus groups were facilitated by a non-member of
222 staff (postgraduate research student) to encourage the students to speak freely on the topic. The
223 students were assured that their comments would in no way have an impact on their own
224 assessment. The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed with all participants being
225 anonymised before the transcripts were presented to department staff (each student was
226 represented with a number - signifying focus group - and letter, e.g. student 3B). Data collection and
227 use followed the research ethics guidelines as set by the Economic and Social Research Council and
228 was approved by the King's College London Research Ethics Office, with the ethical approval code
229 MR/17/18-54.

230

231 The focus groups sample was designed to be representative of second and third (final) year students,
232 so that all participants would have at least one year's experience of assessment and feedback in the
233 department. Participants were invited across the BA/BSc divide to ensure that the sample was
234 representative. Finally, students were recruited to include a mix of high and low performers based
235 on their exam marks for the previous year. The students were invited via email, and they were
236 compensated with a £25 Amazon voucher for their participation. With a mix of high and low
237 performers in each category, the final sample included: Year 2, BA: 11 students; Year 2, BSc: 5
238 students; Year 3, BA: 6 students; Year 3, BSc: 6 students. To keep identities anonymous, transcripts

239 did not distinguish between BA and BSc students, but groups contained a mix of students from both
240 programmes.

241

242 The focus groups were structured in three parts. In the first, the students were asked about their
243 *understanding of feedback*, including questions such as ‘How would you define feedback?’, ‘What is
244 the purpose of feedback?’, and ‘How do you receive feedback (in practice)?’ In the second part, they
245 were asked about their *experiences of feedback* in the department. Questions here included ‘Can
246 you give an example of really good/bad feedback and explain why you liked/disliked it?’; ‘Is feedback
247 more important for certain forms of assessment than others and why?’ and ‘Do you look for patterns
248 in your feedback over time?’ In the third and final part, the students were asked to discuss *ideas for*
249 *improving feedback* in the future, including questions such as ‘How could feedback be different to (a)
250 help you improve your knowledge; (b) help you improve your next piece of work; and (c) prepare
251 you for life after graduation?’ and ‘If you were designing your own feedback, what would you
252 emphasise?’ These questions were approached in a semi-structured fashion to allow the focus group
253 convener and students to respond to the discussion and explore the various topics as they emerged.

254

255 **Results and discussion: Student perception of assessment and feedback practice**

256

257 Following transcription of the focus groups (totaling c.50,000 words) and review of the transcript by
258 the authors, several main themes emerged as being particularly relevant to student perceptions of
259 assessment and feedback practice, and student agency in particular. These themes were identified
260 by grouping similar comments from the different groups across the three parts of the focus groups
261 outlined above, and subjectively categorizing them into (1) understanding of assessment practice
262 and the purpose and delivery of feedback, (2) benchmarking assessment expectations concerns
263 around marking and feedback consistency, and (3) student agency. The following results and
264 discussion are based around these three main themes.

265

266 *Understanding assessment practice and the purpose and delivery of feedback*

267

268 Student comments indicated that they care greatly about the summative marks they receive for
269 their assessment, as this will determine the classification of degree they will receive; in the
270 calculation of their overall performance, only marks count. This was reflected in some of the
271 comments made: “It’s the mark that matters most, because obviously that’s one of the greatest
272 indications of the level of success.” [2B]; “I obviously just take the mark into consideration” [4A]. “A

273 lot of people in other universities, their first year is just a waste of time, because it doesn't count for
274 anything towards their degree." [3A].

275

276 When asked to reflect on the purpose of feedback, students clearly perceived that feedback is
277 intended to facilitate improvement and development, though this tended to be expressed in vague
278 terms: "Emphasizing areas in which you can improve on...how you can further develop." [1A];
279 "Constructive criticism [that can] maybe enhance your performance academically" [5C]. Most
280 students saw it as a combination of positive and negative comments, e.g. "Pros and cons in the
281 work" [2D]; "A list of stuff that you could do better; a list of stuff that went well." [3A], though this
282 could more accurately be framed as comments on aspects that were done well against those that
283 were done less well or were absent.

284

285 There were differences in perception regarding several aspects of feedback purpose and delivery,
286 however. Students discussed the relative merits of (as they termed it) positive and negative
287 feedback. Several students opined that although positive feedback was worthwhile, and should be
288 recorded so that "if you've done something good in your essay [and] next time you don't include it...
289 then you've lost out." [2C], it was the negative that held most value, as this better facilitated
290 improvement: "I do understand positive feedback, but... negative feedback is more important... it
291 does hurt a little bit, it actually motivates me." [2B]; "I'd rather have negative feedback, because it
292 motivates you to do better." [2D]. In one case negative (critical) feedback seemed transformative:
293 "[my tutor]... ripped mine to shreds, and since then I've completely changed the way I write...
294 although it was horrible, that's probably the best feedback I've ever had." [2C]. Others noted that
295 too much negative feedback might cause some students to "lose all their motivation; I'm wasting
296 away my time." [2A].

297

298 Indeed, several students felt that the most frustrating part of feedback were noncommittal or
299 uncritical comments: "The worst thing is getting an essay back, and getting your mark, and getting
300 any feedback, just a really blasé response, and...not knowing." [2B]; "There's nothing worse than
301 getting... a disappointing mark, and then the feedback just be positive. [I would think] 'well, why
302 didn't I get 100% then?'" [2C]; "The feedback doesn't match the mark for me... you've said lots of
303 good things about it and given me a 2.2 [lower second classification]." [3A]; "I've had feedback that's
304 been really positive and... barely any negatives, and the grade's been like 62... why haven't you given
305 me a first [highest classification], then?" [5E].

306

307 Concerns about vagueness versus specificity of comments were raised. Students clearly objected to
308 'vague' feedback that identified broad weaknesses (e.g. in understanding, organization or writing
309 style) as opposed to 'specific' feedback that explains how and why particular elements or examples
310 of the essay are problematic: "Picking examples in your work..." [1B]; "Being specific... helps me
311 understand where I've gone wrong" [2B]; "The best feedback that [I] could probably get is specific to
312 pulling out sentences, pulling out this specific section... this would be seriously helpful." [6D]. There
313 was an agreement amongst students that such specific, detailed feedback is what they want,
314 because this will facilitate higher marks: "I'm looking to know how to get the grade that I want to
315 get... the feedback I'm looking for is how to get to 70 percent plus [i.e. a first class mark]" [6A].
316 "Although there are marking criteria, I literally have no idea... what the difference is between a 67
317 and a 73... so understanding specifically how they will place me will help me understand what I need
318 to do to get that higher mark." [6A]. Vagueness of feedback can result from limited marking time on
319 the part of the assessor, and a need to justify a mark rather than give formative guidance.
320 Nevertheless, it was clear that many students found such feedback confusing, and that this seemed
321 to represent a barrier to engagement.

322

323 There was also some confused use of terms 'general' and 'specific' in relation to feedback, with most
324 students seeing general feedback as that related to broader, stylistic issues such as "the way you
325 write your essay," [1C], and noting "You're never going to write the same essay twice... general
326 feedback for your essay style... is more helpful." [1B]. In this context, 'general' was interpreted as
327 feedback that would be easily transferable to a broadly similar type of assessment (e.g. another
328 essay, regardless of topic). Specific feedback was sometimes used to refer to content-related
329 feedback (e.g. evidence of misunderstanding of material) as opposed to style, but at other times was
330 used to mean specific and detailed examples of what the marker means (including in relation to
331 style). It was clear that most students desired detailed 'specific' feedback, but in relation to essay
332 style and norms (and therefore transferable) rather than content-focused. "Unless you had another
333 module in that topic, it's more...what [do I] need to change in my writing style to adapt to other
334 essays." [5C]. Overall, most students wanted detailed guidance on the marking criteria (especially
335 key terms in the rubric, such as the meaning of 'critical analysis') and how to write an essay to "push
336 into the next band" [5C], not to be advised what concepts they haven't understood. This reflects a
337 general focus on marks and performance rather than deeper learning; if acquisition of a valued body
338 of knowledge was the principle motivation, students would more highly value this kind of feedback.
339 One student did note this: "It's about whether you're here to just expand your knowledge and
340 interest for the subject you're doing, or if you're just here to get a degree to get to where you want

341 to [be] after. It's down to the individual." [6C]. However, it is also indicative of a deeper anxiety
342 resulting from a performance culture and assessment practices that place emphasis only on the
343 mark.

344

345 Lack of transparency around assessor expectations relating to marking criteria is an important
346 consideration and may be at the heart of some of these comments and concerns. Students may be
347 confused around both the use of general terms (such as 'critical analysis', 'critical reflection',
348 'originality', 'excellent/sound/good understanding' and so on, which are at the heart of many
349 marking schemes) as well as how the *assessors* are interpreting these terms. An important question
350 for future consideration is whether assessors vary in their understanding, interpretation, and
351 reflection on the marking criteria and key terms. Such variation is likely to be a source of further
352 anxiety for students, and understanding assessor perceptions of assessment practice, alongside that
353 of students, would be particularly pertinent here (Bloxham et al. 2016).

354

355 Some students displayed impressive insight in relation to the complexities of feedback. One student
356 was particularly perceptive in identifying that feedback is not just aimed at students but also "the
357 administration. That's like three actors [student, marker, administration] in some sort of nexus
358 where everyone has to understand what everyone else wants." [5B]. Indeed, this arguably pinpoints
359 one of the key challenges for assessors. Noncommittal, vague or overly negative responses, along
360 with a lack of detailed specificity, may be symptomatic of this nexus and the multiple objectives that
361 feedback must meet, as noted above. The combination of summative and formative aims within
362 many pieces of assessment in the department creates a well-recognised conflict between the desire
363 to provide formative feedback targeted at the student, and to justify the mark awarded; with the
364 latter tending to become more dominant, as observed more generally (Price et al. 2011). Part of the
365 dissatisfaction students feel with feedback may be indicative of this tendency for justification of the
366 mark given (why it didn't get a higher mark, where it sits in the marking rubric) rather than guidance
367 for improvement. This is a constraint on assessor agency, and is a structural issue within assessment
368 practice that should be resolved (Price et al. 2011); within the current configuration, markers may be
369 unable to give the feedback they would prefer.

370

371 Students generally displayed a short-term view of the utility of feedback. When asked if feedback
372 was useful for building knowledge and skills that would last beyond the university (i.e. going into
373 employment or future study), the consensus was that it wasn't relevant: "I don't think feedback for
374 once you've left university...for me that's not important. What is important is the present and how I

375 can improve in the next couple of weeks to get my degree.” [2B]; “The... important thing is
376 concentrate on current feedback, for this essay or next essay, not on [the] future.” [2A]; “If you’re
377 going into [a job focused on] that particular topic, then yes [it’s useful]. If not, you can’t really be
378 bothered.” [3A]; “It’s more about the feedback for now, improving for the next piece of
379 coursework.” [4B]. This further reflects anxiety over performance and the need for immediate
380 improvement rather than holistic growth.

381

382 Feedback was also seen to become less important as students progressed through the degree: “As
383 you get into third year, the feedback becomes less and less important. If you’d given feedback
384 correctly in first and second year, you probably wouldn’t need it that much.” [3A]. This comment
385 highlights that early experiences with feedback can be particularly important, and are at odds with
386 the temptation to provide greater feedback for the more significant and advanced final year
387 modules: a good case in point being the final year dissertation, which is the largest piece of work
388 that KCL Geography students complete and arguably the one for which they receive the most
389 feedback – but by the time students receive it, they have no more assessments to complete and are
390 close to their final degree classification.

391

392 Feedback was also considered by some students to be less important if you did well. “If someone
393 gets a first, they wouldn’t really look at the feedback... they’ve already achieved it, and they
394 wouldn’t want to further improve.” [3C]; “With the university culture that we have, if you’ve got in
395 the 70s, you feel like you’ve accomplished what you need to, so people will probably just skip the
396 feedback, because... they’ve got where they want to be.”[5A]. Once this standard is achieved,
397 feedback loses its purpose.

398

399 Comments made by students in the focus groups reflected ‘consumer attitudes’. In a study of UK
400 undergraduate students published in 2002, Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) found that students
401 were not becoming ‘instrumental consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark’ (p. 54)
402 but that ‘many of today’s students have a ‘consumerist awareness’ reflected in a focus on achieving
403 a grade alongside intrinsic motivations’ (p. 61). More recently, Bunce et al. (2017) determined that
404 consumer orientations were important mediators of relationships between students and aspects of
405 educational provision, and were associated with lower academic performance, especially in Science,
406 Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, which may be more employment-
407 focused and have greater emphasis on surface learning – and which Geography has a complex
408 relationship with (Domosh, 2014; RGS-IBG, 2017). Changes in the UK HE sector, including dramatic

409 increases in tuition fees and an increasingly competitive job market, are likely to have reinforced
410 consumer attitudes amongst students. This was reflected in many of the comments made by
411 students in the focus groups, who were particularly concerned about marking practice, and how
412 feedback should facilitate higher marks in subsequent assessments.

413

414 *Benchmarking assessment expectations and concerns around marking and feedback consistency*

415

416 With marks being of such importance, a large student concern was marking standards and
417 consistency – partly in terms of feedback given, but largely in the mark awarded. Many students
418 expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack of standardisation and consistency: “Even as a
419 third [final] year sometimes, it’s hard for me to gauge what qualifies as a good, critical essay.” [1A];
420 “the people who will mark your essay [are] very subjective” [2D]; “The problem with the marking is
421 that it is done by one person, and a lot of the time they’re quite personal comments.” [4A]; “How do
422 you know if someone else would’ve looked in the same way?” [4E]; “[How can marking differ] when
423 it’s such a universal system that should be applied regimentally?” [5C]; “I feel like some lecturers...
424 have a 2.1 in their head as a standard, so everything you’re doing good, you’re doing bad, you’re
425 doing according to a 2.1. Whereas other people have a 1st in their head. So... one of my frustrations
426 [is that] everyone’s got a different standard.” [6A]; “Some lecturers mark differently to others...
427 knowing what the median score was for each [marker] kind of helps.” [4B]; “Some people are
428 stricter than others... we’re feeling that some people might get more marks or less marks depending
429 on the marker.” [3E]. Concerns over consistency and fairness also fed into the level of feedback
430 given, though this was a lesser issue: “Depending on what [marker] you get, you can also get a
431 massively different level of feedback.” [6A].

432

433 The reality of mark inconsistency has been explored elsewhere (e.g. Read, Francis and Robson 2005;
434 Bloxham et al. 2016), and is unavoidable to some extent, because “assessment decisions at this level
435 are so complex, intuitive and tacit that variability is inevitable.” (Bloxham et al., p.466). The
436 problematic expectation of marking consistency by students often results from opaque assessment
437 practices. A detailed and extensive regulatory framework of assessment based on marking criteria
438 and multiple quality assurance stages creates the illusion of objectivity and standardisation, when it
439 is widely recognised (though often not communicated to students) that marking is partially
440 subjective and context-dependent (Bloxham et al. 2016).

441

442 Managing and moderating variability and inconsistency is largely the purpose of second marking
443 processes and scrutiny by external examiners from other universities; these should ensure that
444 variation is kept within reasonable boundaries, though this can be difficult (Sadler, 2013) and has
445 been argued to be counter-productive (Bloxham, 2009). During an undergraduate career, the
446 subjective awarding of a perceived 'inconsistently low' mark is likely to be balanced by the awarding
447 of an 'inconsistently high' mark over the course of multiple summative assessments by different
448 assessors, but students (of course) do not complain of high marks as being subjective and potentially
449 erroneous. Instead, only when low (and therefore 'unfair') marks are awarded does dissatisfaction
450 arise. Furthermore, this only has to occur a small number of times for students to become
451 disillusioned with their assessment practice and note its inherent inconsistency and subjectivity. This
452 is probably partly responsible for the observed drop in confidence in markers between first year and
453 third year students observed by Francis (2008). Indeed, students were concerned about their
454 inability to challenge (perceived) 'low' marks, or inadequate feedback: "There's no mechanism to
455 contest the mark [4B]; "There's no process, no send-it-back button [to say] please have a look at this
456 and give us some actual good feedback." [6A].

457

458 Such concerns about quality assurance and standards signalled a lack of understanding and
459 confidence in the role of moderation processes and external examiners, and also reflected an
460 anxiety about the value of the degree achieved nationally: "Do we even know what's the percentage
461 of the people who get a first? What's the average compared to other universities? Is a 70 here worth
462 a 70 at Cambridge? What does it mean to get out of King's with a 2.1?" [5B].

463

464 For some students the solution they saw to this was to increase quality assurance and rigour, for
465 example the creation of not just a marking scheme but a 'marking method': "There's a point where
466 there needs to be like a criteria upon what is actually giving; like a marking method, I guess." [3C]
467 (i.e. how many points are being awarded for what, rather than a broader overall mark classification).
468 For others, more extensive second marking procedures were desired (though a second marking
469 process already exists): "I think I'd like two people marking it and to correct everything." [3A];
470 "having some sort of consistency between the different tutors would be helpful in the marking...
471 different people can't be exactly the same and mark the same but it feels like [it should] maybe be
472 second marked or... a bit more accurate." [3D]; "It would be helpful if they would get maybe two
473 people marking" [4A]. Only one student recognised that such expectations of precision are
474 unrealistic: "obviously every person can't mark at the same...standard." [3D].

475

476 Clearly expectations have to be managed, and that may involve greater honesty and transparency
477 about the marking process and how marking is achieved – for example that assessment is placed in
478 bands based on expert judgement, rather than totting up percentages. One student was perceptive
479 of this: “I assume when you read, you must just think automatically like 2.1, 1st, 2.2. I feel like it’s
480 categorised quite generally.” [6B]. Though the tone and context of the comment suggested that this
481 was a criticism, it is the primary way in which many forms of assessment are graded, and how most
482 expert judgement works (Yorke, 2011). However, it should also be recognised that expert judgement
483 may also involve different interpretations of assessment criteria, and techniques such as mark
484 calibration or benchmarking may be effective ways of helping to mitigate inconsistency (O’Connell et
485 al. 2016); forms of best practice that are utilised in the Department.

486

487 Students receive relatively little information on assessment practice, and as a result their
488 expectations of consistency are unrealistic. As the reality becomes clear, they feel that their
489 assessors have been disingenuous. Rather than trying to put in place more extensive and time-
490 consuming mechanisms to improve consistency to address student concerns (which take away from
491 other things, like teaching and educational innovation), it may be more helpful to the students to
492 educate them about the nature of marking and how and why inconsistency exists – and that it does
493 not always affect them negatively. In this, we would be following Bloxham et al.’s (2016, p.466)
494 suggestion that “universities should be more honest with themselves and with students, and actively
495 help students to understand that application of assessment criteria is a complex judgement and
496 there is rarely an incontestable interpretation of their meaning.”

497

498 *Student agency*

499

500 A consistent source of frustration for assessors is that despite efforts to improve assessment and
501 feedback practice, students remain dissatisfied or seem unwilling or unable to engage with
502 feedback. This is frustrating given that students may well be doing so, but in ways that are less
503 obvious to both students and assessors (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Several potential
504 constraints on student agency have already been presented: confusion over the meaning and utility
505 of feedback and guidance provided by assessors, and frustration over a perceived lack of marker
506 consistency and the inability to contest marks. Students are likely to struggle in overcoming these
507 constraints, and in many cases are unable to. As a result, several students indicated that they do not
508 engage with feedback: “I haven’t always read the feedback I have been given.” [4F]; “I’ve never
509 really looked at feedback unless I consistently kept getting low grades...I only really looked at

510 feedback if I thought there were problems and...I could've got a better grade than I did." [5D]; "If
511 you've got in the 70s [a first class mark] you feel like you've accomplished what you need to, so I
512 think people will probably just skip the feedback." [5A]; "I think I hardly looked at feedback. I looked
513 at the grade. If it was a bad grade, I didn't want to read the feedback. If it was a good grade, I didn't
514 care what the feedback said." [6B]. This fed into a wider lack of agency in that students felt they
515 lacked direction in their performance more generally, limiting their independent learning skills (as
516 observed by Gravett and Kinchin, 2018): "They didn't really teach us how to do the figures. We had
517 to actually look online to find out how to do them." [3C]; "If they expect it of us, they should be
518 teaching it to us." [4C].

519

520 Several comments emerged from the focus groups that offered further insights into student agency
521 in relation to assessment and feedback. Students often noted that they desired specific, detailed
522 feedback (as above) and also that they wanted oral feedback: "that would be very helpful, to go to
523 someone who has marked your work to actually speak about the feedback... so you get... a better
524 understanding of it." [1C]; "go through it with me and actually, you know, point out where I've
525 missed the mark." [1B]; "[we] need more coaching." [2D]; "more verbal would be nice" [4A]; "Face
526 to face is so useful compared to... email." [6D]. Students felt that this would help them overcome the
527 constraint of confusion in feedback, and give them greater agency to engage with it; observations
528 supported by Chalmers, Mowat and Chapman (2018), who found that first year undergraduate
529 students found face-to-face marking and feedback more beneficial than written.

530

531 Face-to-face feedback is, to an extent, achievable. The feedback process does not necessarily end
532 once students receive written comments on their assessment. In the Department of Geography at
533 King's all marking text ends with encouragement to visit the marker in their advice and support
534 hours (office hours), or make an appointment, to get further feedback or to clarify anything that's
535 unclear. From the assessor's view, this is providing agency to the students, so that they can make the
536 most of their feedback opportunities. Yet it was clear that many students do not take advantage of
537 advice and support hours to enhance feedback: "it's intimidating on my part to sort of ask... there
538 were a couple of times that I tried to arrange but... we just didn't manage to get a time down. In the
539 end I just gave up trying... it was too much work." [1A]; "sometimes I feel like I'm an inconvenience
540 to them, where it's kind of like 'that is your job'." [1B]; "I don't think that should be a thing that I
541 have to talk to them about." [2C]; "I would only do it for lower marks" [4B]; "There's no point in
542 going because nothing's going to change. The mark's the most important thing." [4B]; "I think that
543 people are [too] stressed out to go back to the people that marked their essay" [5B]; "People don't

544 know how to approach people if they have got a problem.” [5C]. This reflects the power structure in
545 the assessor-student relationship that is underappreciated by many assessors, especially in a system
546 that does not allow marks or expert judgement to be challenged; the assessor, at least in the student
547 view, holds all the power, and this may be one reason why they rely on crude tools such as the NSS
548 to vocalise their frustration. Despite students having the agency to achieve greater understanding by
549 using advice and support hours, the process of doing so seems intimidating or ineffective.

550

551 This was not a universal feeling, and it was clear that some students did exercise agency in seeking
552 out oral feedback, but that this was less common: “It has to come from you, and you have to sort of
553 collaborate... a lot of people don’t talk to their tutor one to one about specific marks.” [2C]; “I think
554 if you want... to get oral feedback, you need to take it into your own hands to be organised. I
555 wouldn’t expect my tutor... to go through my essays, because I know for a fact they don’t have the
556 time to do that.” [2B] “I think it just needs to be organised by you, because to have oral feedback for
557 everyone, it’s going to be really difficult to organise.” [2D].

558

559 The same was true for metafeedback. The opportunity of compiling a portfolio of feedback is rarely
560 taken in practice, and comments suggested that few students seemed willing to take the active step
561 of saving their feedback (despite this only taking seconds); rather viewing their part of practice to
562 end with the act of submitting the assessment, and all other agency resting with staff or the
563 university more broadly. Several students lamented this, criticising the system for not automatically
564 saving the feedback for them: “We lose it after a period of time... I wish I’d [printed it], because I’ve
565 lost it all. Which makes the system a bit rubbish” [2B]; “I know that, on KEATS, I’m not able to see
566 the feedback from last year; it’s like very problematic...so like where the submission inbox is, they’ve
567 replaced it for people resitting. I guess that we all want to keep somewhere the feedback that we’ve
568 received without having to systematically copy and paste somewhere.” [5B]; “[you think] I’ll come
569 back and read that later... and then you realise that it’s no longer there... and you haven’t read any
570 of the feedback.” [4F]. This suggests that some students feel disempowered to the extent that they
571 expect the university to supply everything, and they are passive consumers; they become the
572 opposite of the independent learners that higher education aims to create, as encapsulated in a
573 particularly enlightening response: “If they expect it of us, they should be teaching it to us.” [4C].

574

575 One possible solution is to have pre-completion formative assessments, where feedback is given but
576 marks are not summative. Formative assessment in general has been viewed as important in
577 encouraging students to become self-regulated learners, and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note

578 that formative feedback should not be just a process of transmission from assessor to student, but
579 one where students are encouraged to engage with their own motivation, goal-inspired internal
580 feedback. This is perhaps more possible with pre-completion formative assessment, where students
581 can take greater 'risks' without affecting their grades. Assessors have expressed concerns that lack
582 of student agency might make this change in assessment pattern ineffective. This was supported by
583 some comments: "You've got so many other assessments. You're just not going to do it." [1B]; "If
584 you're not going to gain anything, like a mark towards your degree, I just don't bother." [4A]; though
585 others suggested that it might be useful if combined with a summative exam: "If it was a coursework
586 module, I wouldn't bother; if it was an exam module, I think it does help." [4E]; and one student
587 noting that reticence may be due to unfamiliarity, and that they may be useful: "I haven't had much
588 experience...with formative assignments [meaning non-summative pre-completion
589 assignments]...when I was doing my two formative assignments, I cared a lot more about the
590 feedback, as opposed to the grades." [1A]. Indeed, this may help to relieve the assessment burden
591 felt by both staff and students: "In this department there's a huge emphasis on summative
592 coursework. Almost every single piece of coursework that I've ever written in my student life was
593 important for my degree. And [there's] a lot of pressure related to that." [5B]

594

595 This last point is perhaps reflective of an assessment 'arms race' as observed by Harland et al. (2015),
596 whereby students exposed to predominantly summative assessments become demotivated to
597 engage with anything that is not summative or outside of expectations, compromising other
598 educational objectives and leading to dissatisfaction and a paralysis of agency on the part of both
599 students and assessors. Harland et al.'s (2015) call for assessment practices that are more
600 sympathetic with 'slow scholarship', and more infrequent but integrated units of assessment, might
601 well help to provide space for students to exercise agency and therefore become more self-
602 regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), though this would require a more profound
603 shift in assessment practice. Regardless of the specific changes enacted, students should be involved
604 in the decisions behind such changes, as a way of fostering both agency and dialogue, and ultimately
605 empowering students, as models of best practice indicate (National Union of Students, 2015).

606

607 **Conclusions and considerations: Agentic responses to improve assessment and feedback practice**

608

609 The focus groups elucidated several aspects of student perception of assessment and feedback
610 practice. It is clear that students knew what feedback was for, and that they desired it, but that it
611 was seen as a tool primarily to achieve greater marks, which is the main motivation for students. A

612 lack of student agency seemed to stem from three main constraints: (1) confusion over the feedback
613 given, especially where it was vague, noncommittal, or aimed at QA actors rather than the students;
614 (2) perceived inconsistencies in marking and feedback; and (3) a lack of power within their
615 community of practice, for example to seek further feedback or contest the interpretation and
616 meaning of assessment. This lack of agency leads to dissatisfaction, which is reflected in poor survey
617 scores (e.g. NSS).

618

619 Although the focus group method provided many detailed responses, variability in the student body
620 remains unexamined. We ensured that students were drawn from across the BA/BSc
621 (human/physical) divide (whether it truly exists or not) but did not label students as either BA/BSc –
622 and nor did any of the students raise this in the discussion. No points of contention or difference
623 between BA/BSc assessment practice were mentioned at all, suggesting that assessment was not (or
624 at least was not recognized as being) unduly partisan, and that if students strongly identified as
625 BA/BSc, this was not considered in relation to assessment.

626

627 We also did not separate students into Home/EU or International students; doing so may have
628 raised issues about prior experiences of assessment practice before embarking upon education at a
629 UK university. This may be particularly relevant in the given context, as London-based Russell-Group
630 universities have high proportions of international students. Likewise, variation in sex, gender,
631 ethnicity and economic background were not considered, but may all influence approaches and
632 perceptions of learning and assessment (e.g. Hardwick et al. 2000; Adams et al., 2014).

633

634 Such variation will be reflected in the varying motivations of students, as noted by Spronken-Smith
635 et al. (2015). Students who are taking an undergraduate degree with the main motivation of ‘gaining
636 a qualification’, for example, will have different expectations and perceptions than those whose
637 primary motivation is acquiring key skills, or growing as an individual. In these focus groups we
638 explored some aspects of motivation, but deeper insights are likely to be gained with more detailed
639 discussions and a wider sample of students.

640

641 Any reconfiguration of assessment practice should attempt to overcome constraints around
642 confusion, perceived inconsistency, power relations and agency, and methods to achieve this may
643 include: (1) reducing confusion by providing open and transparent information on assessment and
644 feedback practice to students, as well as ensuring that feedback is as specific and detailed as
645 possible, especially in the early part of their undergraduate career; (2) developing a dialogue with

646 students about marking consistency and the reality of expert judgement; (3) being more aware of
647 power structures and how students might experience them, for example by making it easier for
648 students to approach staff for feedback; (4) ensuring that assessors are aware of these issues and
649 undertake best practice exercises, including reflecting on assessment and feedback practice,
650 exploring meaning and interpretation behind marking criteria and their application, and marking
651 calibration; (5) being more aware of student backgrounds, orientations and motivations, to avoid
652 assumptions around a 'one size fits all' approach to assessment and feedback; and (6) reducing
653 frequent points of summative assessment in favour of a 'slow scholarship' approach of fewer, more
654 integrated assessments.

655

656 Once improving student agency has been achieved, structural realignment of assessment and
657 feedback practice might include having separate (though linked) formative, pre-completion
658 assessments and summative assessments, with feedback effort concentrated on the former to
659 maximize student-specific guidance and preparation for summative performance. Feedback on the
660 summative assessment could then be much more modest and consist of mark justification for quality
661 assurance. This would increase agency for both staff and students, allowing staff to focus on the
662 feedback they feel most useful, and students to make the most of the feedback they receive.

663

664 Overall, the findings presented here suggest that student agency plays an important role in
665 assessment and feedback practice, particularly in the context of the UK's increasingly marketised
666 and commercialised Higher Education landscape. Encouraging a dialogue to enable students to
667 understand their community of practice, and the inherent nature of subjectivities and expert
668 judgement that are embedded within it, represents an important step towards finding ways to
669 enhance that agency. Exploration of the nuances of practice and agency should be considered by all
670 HEIs desiring to improve the standard of their education. These challenges are likely to be more
671 significant for geography than other fields, given the subject's interdisciplinarity and broad range of
672 subjects, methodological approaches, techniques, and assessment types. It is therefore important
673 that geographers explore the complexities surrounding assessment and feedback practice, and
674 should embrace research and innovation in this area to ensure the highest standards for
675 geographical education.

676

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Assessment type	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 (Final year)
Exam	5	9	8
Essay	4	18	15
Report	3	4	6
Proposal	0	3	1
Briefing	0	0	3
Visual Presentation	1	2	4
Oral Presentation	2	5	4
Code	0	4	0
Build	0	0	0
Dissertation	0	0	1
Total	15	45	42

787 Table 1: Number of assessments by type across the BA/BSc Geography undergraduate programmes
 788 at King’s College London for 2018-19. This is the full suite of assessments utilised, and students
 789 would experience a selection of these based on the modules chosen. This includes all pre-
 790 completion (non-summative) assessments and in cases where visual and oral presentations are
 791 combined, these assessments have been counted twice. A ‘code’ assessment requires writing
 792 computer programming/scripting code, which should perform a specified task or data analysis; while
 793 a ‘build’ assessment is the submission of built instruments or sensors (sometimes running on code in
 794 a specified programming/scripting language that may also be part of the assessment), and which
 795 may combine both software and hardware development to perform a specified task/objective. In
 796 2018-19 ‘build’ assessments were not used, but are incorporated in the suite of assessments that are
 797 available within the Department.

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