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| **Beds SU Policy Ideal: Improvements to the Auditing and Delivery of UoB Assessment and Feedback Practices** |
| **Beds SU believes**…  *The University of Bedfordshire (UoB) should carry out more stringent auditing and reviewing of assessment and feedback practices (as outlined in the UoB CRe8 framework) – as well as provide greater opportunities for student-staff liaison over assessment and feedback – in order to maximize the extent to which assessments enable students to achieve the necessary knowledge and skills described in their programme’s intended learning outcomes. Further still, learning resources – including the digital examination environment (Wiseflow) and preparatory materials such as lecture slides – must be improved to give students the best chance for success in assessments and examinations.* |
| **What are the facts?**   * 1. ***University of Bedfordshire CRe8 Framework: Assessment and Feedback Proposed Standards***   The curriculum framework adopted by the UoB – CRe8 – highlights the importance of assessment, not simply as a measurement of certification (i.e. degree classification), but so too as an important means to support students’ ongoing learning and development. As per the CRe8 framework, the university should seek to develop the following six tenants related to assessment and feedback:   * *Assessment strategies which support learner development and focus on employability attributes and skills alongside academic abilities and understanding (A1).* * *Assessment tasks which replicate or simulate those required by graduate employment (A2).* * *Assessment briefs which clearly articulate the task, expectations and standards (A3).* * *Providing focussed, constructive and timely feedback to support learning, improve performance, build confidence and encourage positive motivational beliefs (A4).* * *Students developing self-regulatory behaviours through self- and peer- assessment against given criteria (A5).* * *Students and tutors using the outcomes of assessment to help shape future learning (A6).*   Nevertheless, despite the CRe8 framework stipulating a number of important principles related to the delivery of assessment and feedback, Beds SU has received a considerable volume of complaints from students surrounding the quality, timeliness and constructiveness of assessment feedback – which calls into question the extent to which the curriculum objectives are being upheld across a number of UoB courses.  Please see the following section for a summary of student accounts relating to assessment and feedback.   * 1. ***UoB Student Accounts: Assessment & Feedback***      1. ***Students are questioning the validity of feedback***   During a visit to the LSC Birmingham site, an L5 Business Studies student reported to a Beds SU representative that a number of students on their course had received nearly identical feedback, despite some students scoring a first-class mark, and others scoring a third. As such, students have questioned the validity and usefulness of the feedback provided on their course. Likewise, an L5 Course Rep for Psychology reported that they had previously received feedback on an assessment that contained no feedback at all, just a grade. Additionally, the student reported that in another module, although the cohort were given thorough feedback on an assignment, many students were unaware of how the feedback actually applied to their work. As such, the student expressed concerns regarding the constructiveness and comprehensibility of the feedback provided.  The University has already set out minimum expectations of its teaching practices, available in Chapter 11 of the Quality Handbook, which stipulate that a detailed and comprehensive assignment brief for each assignment and associated grading criteria must be available to students, and grading must sufficiently be justified following that prespecified grading criteria. However, the above accounts provided by students from both CATS and UBBS suggests that the feedback provided in actuality may not be meeting the criteria set out in the Quality Handbook.   * + 1. ***Students have called into question the clarity of assignment briefs, the marking rubric and examinations/assessment guidance***   During a meeting with CATS faculty staff and the SU, a number of L5 Computer Science students voiced concerns around the clarity of assignment briefs and accompanying marking rubric. That is, a number of the students claimed that they felt as though the short feedback they were provided with on a recent assessment did not coincide with the assignment brief, or the information they were given in class with regards to the marking criteria, despite the fact that the UoB Quality Handbook stipulates that “assessment criteria should be shared with students in advance of the completion of assessments”. Indeed, these student accounts suggest that assignment briefs on some courses do not clearly articulate the task, expectations and standards of assessments to students, as is stipulated as a key tenant of effective feedback in the CRe8 framework.  Additionally, during an online meeting with the SU on 11/02/2022, an L7 Accounting student contended that although lecturers discuss assessments in class, instructions can often lack clarity or be ‘jargon-laden’. The student would thereby prefer more concrete instructions for approaching assessments from lecturers. During the same meeting, an L4 Forensic Science student also contended that examination instructions are not always clear. For example, the student – who is the first-year Course Rep for Forensic Science – claimed that during a recent examination, the cohort went into the exam hall thinking they were allowed to use notes/references, however, invigilators told them they could not. The student contended that the class were not sufficiently informed by lecturers that they had to memorize the references for the exam.   * + 1. ***Students have flagged the timeliness of assignment feedback***   Students have also approached the SU to voice complaints relating to the timeliness of feedback. For example, a graduate who previously studied on the MSc Business Management with Law course claimed that although the feedback they received during their studies was extensive, it was never timely. The student added that their postgraduate course was structured in 3-week blocks, with Assessment 1 scheduled for Week 3, and Assessment 2 scheduled for Week 6. Although the Quality Handbook states that assessment feedback should be provided within 10 working days for any course delivered in block mode, the student claimed that by the time feedback was actually received for the first assignment, it was too late to use it to improve performance in the second assignment.  Further still, a cohort of L5 Computer Science students reported during a meeting with academic staff that they did not receive feedback on an assignment for over two months due to staff sickness, despite the Quality Handbook stipulating that feedback for L5 work should be returned to students within 20 working days. The students reported that the university did not communicate with them to explain the delay in feedback.  From these student accounts, it appears that there has been poor communication from the university in cases where the stipulated feedback timelines cannot be upheld, such as in instances of staff sickness. Additionally, there is evidence of ‘assessment bunching’ in the block course delivery, which violates the idea stipulated in the CRe8 framework that feedback should provide a clear basis from which students can improve on past performance.   * + 1. ***Lack of student-staff liaison regarding feedback***   Some students have reported that they do not have ample opportunity to discuss feedback with academic staff, thereby missing vital opportunities to utilize feedback constructively to improve future performance. For example, a number of students have reported to having no interaction with their PATs, who are in theory supposed to play an important role in discussing feedback with students in cases where they feel that more clarity is needed. That is, the Quality Handbook stipulates students should have a minimum of 3 meetings with their PAT per academic year, which can be used to “discuss the assessment feedback received by the student”. Nevertheless, there is evidence of failure to comply with PAT policy across a number of UoB courses, meaning that students may not be getting ample opportunity to discuss – and receive further clarity on – their assessment feedback with a member of academic staff.  On a similar note, a number of students stated during Student Voice Forums on 16/02/2022 that they would like to have the opportunity to discuss assessment feedback with staff and were not aware that they could do so, despite having recently been notified of PAT feedback week (a university initiative offering students the opportunity to schedule meetings with their PAT specifically tailored around assessment feedback). As such, it seems that the nature of these meetings is not being communicated with enough clarity to students, who seem to be unaware of existing opportunities to discuss assessment feedback with academic staff.   * + 1. ***Complaints around the adoption of a new digital exam environment – ‘Wiseflow’***   Many students across a number of different courses have recently contacted Beds SU with complaints over the new digital examination platform adopted by the UoB, namely Wiseflow. For example, during an online meeting with the SU on 11/02/22, an L4 Midwifery student and an L4 Forensic Science student both contended that tutors did not appear to be sufficiently trained in the utilization of Wiseflow, hence students did not feel adequately briefed on how to use the software for their examinations. This lack of clarity surrounding Wiseflow caused a lot of unnecessary stress during examinations, with the L4 Forensic Science student reporting that some students could not access their examinations on Wiseflow due to using the ‘wrong browser’, even though they had not been notified of any such issues in advance of sitting the examinations.  Further still, during a Student Voice Forum on 14/02/22, an L6 student of Travel, Aviation and Tourism Management reported that students can only see a grade on Wiseflow, and cannot see written feedback. This means that students are unable to identify areas of strength/weakness to help them improve performance in future examinations and assessments.   * + 1. ***Concerns over the weighting of assessments***   A further area of concern identified by students is the fact that some modules entail assessments which are weighted at 100%, a format which does not offer students the opportunity to utilize feedback from the first assessment to improve on the second. For example, during an online meeting with the SU on 11/02/22, an L6 Psychology student stated that if assignments are weighted in a two-tier format (i.e. Assignment 1: 50%, Assignment 2: 50%) then if there is a problem with the students’ understanding of the first assignment brief, then there is scope to improve on the second assignment.   * + 1. ***Insufficient preparatory materials on some courses***     Finally, students have also complained about the quality of learning materials on some courses, which renders them ill equipped for revision for exams and assessments. For example, during a meeting with the SU on 11/02/2022, an L4 Midwifery student reported that lecture slides were not particularly comprehensive. They also added that it is quite common for students on the course to catch COVID due to placements and thereby miss lectures, and given that the slides are quite basic, it is difficult to catch up/ revise for exams. The student felt that lecture materials could be greatly improved, such as via the addition of audio lectures to accompany the PowerPoint slides, which would thereby make future assessments much easier for students to approach. |
| **How does this impact students?**  Although the CRe8 curriculum framework sets out a number of important principles surrounding assessment and feedback that the UoB should in theory be abiding by, evidence from the aforementioned student accounts suggests that the existing quality assurance process when it comes to assessment and feedback is not sufficient. In particular, students have highlighted concerns over the timeliness of feedback, lack of clarity surrounding assessment and examination guidelines, and a lack of opportunity for student-staff liaison to inform and improve assessment and feedback practices going forward, all of which violate a number of ‘Good Practice’ principles set out in the CRe8 framework.  Indeed, insubstantial assessment and feedback practices can detrimentally impact students in a number of ways. For a start, a great deal of academic literature highlights the importance of feedback in terms of improving academic performance in students. For instance, an article by Shafi et al (2017) – which surveyed 91 undergraduate students – found that students look for specific information in their feedback to help improve their future performance[[1]](#footnote-1). As such, if students do not receive timely feedback (i.e. feedback in sufficient time to utilize it to improve performance in future assessments), then this could potentially stunt their academic development in the long term. What’s more, if students do not sufficiently understand the feedback they receive, then they may find it difficult to utilize that feedback to support their academic development.  Further still, there is evidence that unconstructive and insubstantial feedback can increase the likelihood of students dropping out of university. For example, a study by Yorke (2002) determined that the less students believe in themselves, the more explicit and frequent feedback they require in order to succeed at university[[2]](#footnote-2). That is, in a survey of non-completion students, Yorke (2002) identified an unsupportive learning experience as a key factor in their decision to withdraw from university at the end of first year, thereby emphasizing the importance of constructive feedback. Indeed, due to the fact that the UoB has a student body densely populated with the likes of returners to education or first-generation students – who may require more hands-on academic welfare support – coupled with the fact that the UoB has relatively high non-completion rates compared to other higher education providers in the UK[[3]](#footnote-3), a substantial case can be made for a review of existing assessment and feedback practices. Finally, such an initiative would bolster the universities ongoing efforts to improve student retention rates. |
| **What is the Beds SU ideal?**  Given the detrimental impacts of poor assessment and feedback practices on university students, Beds SU believes that improvements should be made to the UoB’s assessment and feedback delivery on five key fronts, namely:  *(1) greater auditing of existing assessment and feedback processes during faculty and portfolio meetings to ensure that the key principles of the CRe8 framework regarding assessment and feedback are being met*  *(2) the provision of more opportunities for student-staff liaison regarding feedback, which is clearly communicated to students, and more time set aside by lecturers to discuss assessment guidance in class to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in assessments and exams*  *(3) improvements to the digital examination platform ‘Wiseflow’, including better instructions of how to use the software for students, and improvements in the provision of feedback via Wiseflow*  *(4) improved preparatory materials – i.e. lecture slides that are more comprehensive for revision purposes, or the introduction of audio lectures to accompany PowerPoint slides*  (1) As there is substantial evidence that the principles related to assessment and feedback outlined in the CRe8 framework are not being met across a number of courses, Beds SU believes that more stringent auditing should take place at course level to ensure that the assessment process better enables students to achieve the necessary knowledge and skills described their programme’s intended learning outcomes. This may take the form of reviewing the timelines of assessment and feedback delivery at course level during portfolio and faculty board meetings, in order to ensure that students across all courses will be able to receive feedback in sufficient time so as to utilize it to help their future academic performance.  (2) A further clear area where the UoB can improve in terms of its’ assessment and feedback processes is by providing more opportunities for student-staff liaison regarding assessments and feedback. For instance, many of the student feedback accounts surrounding assessments received by Beds SU highlight issues such as lack of clarity of feedback and/or assignment briefs. As such, Beds SU believes that tutors should factor in more class time to discuss the expectations of assessed tasks. In particular, lecturers should make efforts to ‘de-jargon’ assessment guidance, and to talk through the likes of assignment briefs with students to ensure that they have not misinterpreted any aspects of assessment guidance. This is particularly relevant in a ‘Widening Participation’ university context, insofar that a significant proportion of the UoB student body may – for instance – be returning to university as mature students, having been out of education for an extended period, and may therefore require additional support in terms of how to approach higher education assessments.  Additionally, Beds SU believes that tutors should provide dedicated drop-in sessions (i.e. office hours) where students can discuss their assessment feedback with staff in order to clarify areas they do not understand. These office hours should be clearly communicated to all students during class times so that all students are fully aware of the support available to them. Finally, staff should endeavour to record and regularly discuss students’ views on assessments and feedback at committee meetings, in order to make amendments where processes are seen to be inefficient (i.e. in cases whereby a number of students report to not understanding the aims of a given assignment brief), thereby improving the extent to which assessments and feedback support students’ overall academic development.  (3) As the university begins to adopt ‘Wiseflow’ on a more widespread basis, more attention needs to be given to ensuring that all academic staff sufficiently understand the software. This is so that they can provide students with detailed instructions for using the software, and likewise ensure that students receive feedback on digital assessments. As per the aforementioned student reports, many students seem to be missing feedback via Wiseflow. A member of the Senior Leadership Team at Beds SU ascertained from the Examinations Working Group that Wiseflow currently defaults to hidden comments, thus, if tutors do not manually change the settings, then students will be unable to see feedback comments on their assessments. Hence, academic staff need to attribute more time to training in Wiseflow so as to ensure that students are not adversely affected.  (4) Beds SU believes that academic staff should endeavour to provide more comprehensive preparatory materials to enable students to preform optimally in examinations. In particular, students would benefit from audio recordings of lectures to accompany PowerPoint slides, especially insofar that the covid pandemic has made student absence more frequent. What’s more, given that many UoB students juggle employment and caring responsibilities alongside their studies, unpreventable absences are more likely to occur. Thus, if students were provided with more comprehensive lecture materials on BREO, then they would have a better chance at completing examinations/assessments to a high standard even if they are absent at some lectures. |

1. Shafi et al “The role of assessment feedback in improving academic buoyancy”: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2017.1356265> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yorke (2002) in Poulos et al (2008), ‘Effectiveness of Feedback: The Students’ Perspective’: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602930601127869> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ITV news article: <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2020-01-03/university-of-bedfordshire-sees-highest-increase-in-dropout-rate-in-england> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)