

A College-wide audit of Year 1 Assessment Feedback

Summary:

Background:

Recent College Policy aims to standardise students' experience with assessment feedback. This academic year (AY 17-18) is the first year with such Policy in place. There is currently no central record of assessment feedback timeliness, and so no easy way of evaluating Policy adherence across the College. This audit provides the first ever College-wide evaluation of assessment feedback timeliness.

Methods:

Assessment information was obtained for all first term, year 1 assessment. Information was input to a central online repository. Academic Representatives were asked to record the dates when they actually received feedback and any feedback-related comments.

Results:

College-wide, 89% (185/207) of assessment feedback was returned within stipulated timeframes. Ninety percent (178/198) was returned within 10 working days. The Faculty of Natural Sciences had the highest feedback return rates (93% returned within both the stipulated dates and 10 working days). Across the College, reasons behind late feedback were communicated with students in 23% (5/22) of cases.

Conclusions:

Feedback timeliness was largely in keeping with the timescales stipulated in the Policy for all year 1 assessment. There is room for improvement in the communication to students around late feedback.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure that assessment feedback timeliness is actively monitored at a departmental level (continuing this practise where it exists and implementing it where it currently does not)
2. Explore assessment feedback timeliness monitoring at a faculty level
3. Ensure that the reasoning behind late assessment feedback is transparently communicated with students in a timely manner
4. Encourage departments to explore methods of evaluating assessment feedback quality

A College-wide audit of Year 1 Assessment Feedback

Introduction:

Timely and constructive feedback is vital to the learning process. It enables students to reflect on their work, and provides guidance for improvement and development. Delayed feedback prevents students from reflecting on their work and applying lessons learnt to subsequent assessment.

The importance of feedback in education is demonstrated through measures to evaluate feedback provision at Universities using initiatives such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). While Imperial College London has been awarded TEF Gold status, student satisfaction with Assessment & Feedback remains low, with the College ranking 139/145 in the Sector in the latest iteration of the NSS.

Last academic year (AY16-17) saw the introduction of College Policy¹ aiming to improve students' experiences with assessment feedback. Developed in partnership with Imperial College Union, this Policy stipulates best practice for feedback return to be ten working days, although flexibility is permitted for different types of assessment¹.

This academic year (AY17-18) is the first year with such Policy in place. While departments are encouraged to monitor the timeliness of their feedback locally, there is currently no central, College-wide record of assessment timeliness. This means there is no easy way of determining whether the Policy is being adhered to across the College.

One of my goals for the year was to run an audit of all Year 1 Undergraduate assessment feedback in order to give insight into which departments were adhering to Policy. Here, I present the first ever College-wide assessment of feedback timeliness.

Methods:

I obtained year 1 assessment information from all departments. Assessment information consisted of: module and assessment titles, student submission dates and stipulated return dates (where provided). Where return dates were not stipulated I used ten working days from the date of submission as the expected return date.

¹ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/registry/academic-governance/public/academic-policy/academic-feedback/Academic-feedback-policy-for-taught-programmes.pdf>

For feedback over the Christmas break, one working day was defined as having to fall within the College’s term dates. For example, in the case of an assessment handed in on the last day of first term, Friday 15th December, ten working days later was taken to be Friday 19th January 2018.

Assessment information was input into department-specific Excel spreadsheets. Each departmental spreadsheet was uploaded to a central OneDrive folder. Academic Representatives² were given access and permissions to edit their department’s spreadsheet. Academic Representatives were asked to input the dates when they actually received their feedback. Feedback was considered ‘received’ when all feedback relevant to the assessment was returned.

A ‘comments’ column was included in the spreadsheet, and Academic Representatives were encouraged to add comments relevant to their feedback. For example: *“Feedback was late because marker was unwell. This was communicated with us and we have no issues with this.”*

Spreadsheets were checked on a fortnightly basis. Academic Representatives received reminder emails if data was missing from their spreadsheet. Data collection started from the beginning of Term 1 (02/10/18) and finished at the end of the audit cycle (05/02/18³).

Data was analysed using Excel. No statistical tests were performed.

Results:

Assessment Feedback Timeliness:

Overall results of assessment feedback timeliness by faculty are shown in **Table 1**

Table 1: Assessment feedback timeless by Faculty

	Items returned in stipulated timeframe (%)	Items returned in 10 working days (%)
Faculty of Engineering	125/141 (87)	118/132* (89)
Faculty of Medicine	8/10 (80)	8/10 (80)
Faculty of Natural Sciences	52/56 (93)	52/56 (93)
College-wide	185/207 (89)	178/198 (90)

* Civil Engineering policy stipulates a 15 day return for all pieces of coursework. It was not deemed relevant to consider whether items were returned within ten working days and excluded from the Faculty of Engineering-wide analysis

² Academic Representatives given access included: Year 1 Reps, Departmental Reps, Academic Affairs Officers

³ This date allowed for all feedback for assessments at the end of term 1 to be returned to students (including a ‘buffer fortnight’ for any late feedback)

Further breakdown of assessment feedback timeliness by departments is shown in **Tables 2-4**.

Table 2: Assessment feedback timeliness within the Faculty of Engineering

	Items returned in stipulated timeframe (%)	Items returned in 10 working days (%)
Faculty of Engineering	125/141 (87)	118/132 (89)
Aeronautical Engineering	*	*
Bioengineering	14/15 (93)	14/15 (93)
Chemical Engineering	20/20 (100)	20/20 (100)
Civil Engineering	7/9 (78)	**
Computing	25/28 (89)	25/28 (89)
Design Engineering	13/18 (72)	13/18 (72)
Earth Science Engineering	14/14 (100)	14/14 (100)
EEE	3/3 (100)	3/3 (100)
EIE	16/18 (89)	16/18 (89)
Materials	11/12 (92)	11/12 (92)
Mechanical Engineering	2/4 (50)	2/4 (50)

*Aeronautical Engineering had one listed assessment with a stipulated return date of “after exam board”. As this fell outside the audit cycle dates this department was excluded from analysis

**Civil Engineering policy stipulates a 15 day return for all pieces of coursework. It was not deemed relevant to consider whether items were returned within ten working days

Table 3: Assessment feedback timeliness within the Faculty of Medicine:

	Items returned in stipulated timeframe (%)	Items returned in 10 working days (%)
Faculty of Medicine	8/10 (80)	8/10 (80)
Medical Biosciences	1/3 (33)	2/3 (67)
Undergraduate Medicine	7/7 (100)	6/7 (86)

Table 4: Assessment feedback timeliness within the Faculty of Natural Sciences:

	Items returned in stipulated timeframe (%)	Items returned in 10 working days (%)
Faculty of Natural Sciences	52/56 (93)	52/56 (93)
Biochemistry	8/9 (89)	8/9 (89)
Biology	7/8 (88)	6/8 (75)
Chemistry	2/3 (67)	3/3 (100)
Maths	9/10 (90)	9/10 (90)
Physics	26/26 (100)	26/26 (100)

Communication of delayed feedback:

Of assessment feedback that was late, **Table 5** shows the likelihood that this information was communicated to students by department:

Table 5: Likelihood that students were informed of the reasoning behind late assessment feedback:

	Items returned late with students informed of reasoning (%)
Faculty of Engineering	
Bioengineering	0/1 (0)
Civil Engineering	0/2 (0)
Computing	0/3* (0)
Design Engineering	2/5 (40)
EIE	1/2 (50)
Materials	0/1 (0)
Mechanical Engineering	0/2 (0)
Total	3/16 (19)
Faculty of Medicine	
Medical Biosciences	1/2 (50)
Total	1/2 (50)
Faculty of Natural Sciences	
Biochemistry	0/1 (0)
Biology	0/1 (0)
Chemistry	0/1 (0)
Maths	1/1 (100)
Total	1/4 (25)

*Students noted that two of these late returns were for whole year assessment, and it was understandable that it was delayed

Discussion:

The results show that assessment feedback timeliness is largely in keeping with the timescales stipulated in the College Policy. Across the three faculties, assessment feedback was returned to students within ten working days in 90% of cases (**Table 1**).

While recognising that ten working days often constitutes best practice for feedback return, the Policy permits a degree of flexibility in feedback timeliness depending on the mode of assessment. In these cases departments are allowed to stipulate unique feedback return deadlines. The results show that feedback timeliness was again largely in keeping with such deadlines, with feedback returned to students within stipulated timeframes in 80-93% of cases across the three faculties (**Table 1**).

The Faculty of Natural Sciences performed particularly strongly, with 93% of assessment feedback returned to students within ten working days. Following

the successful pilot of a 'feedback traffic light' system with the Department of Life Sciences, other departments within the faculty have adopted similar monitoring schemes for assessment feedback. This is likely to contribute to the high rates of assessment feedback return within the stipulated timeframes. While one assessment in Biology fell outside the stipulated timeframe (**Table 4**), it was not viewed as a problem, with the Rep stating: "...good individualised feedback with useful highlighting of areas needing improvement."

Departments within the Faculty of Engineering have made similar efforts to monitor assessment feedback return, but by utilising methods different to the 'traffic light' system used in Life Sciences. These initiatives appear to be similarly effective, with feedback returned to students within stipulated timeframes in 87% of cases (**Table 1**). Civil Engineering is the only department to formally stipulate a feedback return of 15 working days for coursework, meeting this timeframe in 78% (7/9) of cases (**Table 2**). Whilst one of the two late returns provided students with instant feedback for the online portion of assessment, feedback for the written portion was provided two days after the stipulated return date, meaning the item was considered to be late.

The Faculty of Medicine has access to assessment feedback data, but does not regularly monitor feedback timeliness in the same way the other faculties do. This may partly explain the relatively lower proportion of feedback that is returned to students within stipulated timeframes (80% vs. 87% and 93% in the Faculties of Engineering and Natural Sciences, respectively). (**Table 1**). , As all feedback was returned within stipulated timeframes in the department of Undergraduate Medicine, another contributing factor to late feedback return rates could be the new Medical Biosciences degree (**Table 3**). Launched this year, it is possible that stipulated feedback return dates were over-ambitious, meaning it was not practical to return within these dates. This is evidenced by the higher proportion of feedback returned within ten working days (2/3) than within stipulated timings (1/3) (**Table 3**).

While overall assessment feedback timeliness across the faculties was impressive, there is room for improvement in the communication around late feedback. College policy⁴ stipulates that: "*late feedback return should be communicated to those students concerned via email, specifying how long the delay will be,*" yet across the three faculties, students were informed of the reasons behind their late feedback in 19-50% of cases (**Table 5**).

There are often justifiable reasons why feedback may be delayed, and students tend to be understanding. For example, for two cases of late feedback in the department of Computing (**Table 2**), the Rep noted: "*assessed coursework for the entire year; reasonable to take time to mark.*"

⁴ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/registry/academic-governance/public/academic-policy/academic-feedback/Feedback-Traffic-Light-Policy.pdf>

Nevertheless, where feedback is likely to be late, departments should ensure that students are informed, as was noted by the Reps in Maths: “*delay as they need to be reviewed for consistency prior to release,*” and Medical Biosciences: “*...We were informed on 04/12/17 that our feedback would be late. ‘The marks are being adjusted to map the agreed College Mark Scheme, a process which is taking longer than expected.’*”

Limitations:

These results offer a ‘snapshot’ of feedback across one year within the College. Further analysis involving a longer time period and multiple years would be beneficial, especially as most anecdotal information among students is that satisfaction with feedback timeliness decreases in later degree stages.

Academic Representatives were recruited to this audit in the hope they would be representative of their cohort, as it was not feasible for me to monitor the feedback experience of every first year undergraduate student at Imperial. There is the chance that their experiences were *not* reflective of their peers, especially in disciplines with multiple practical sessions running with different facilitators over several weeks.

Another limitation of Academic Representative involvement is the chance of recall bias. Academic Representatives had the option of recording comments related to their feedback, such as whether they had been informed of the reasoning behind late feedback. There is the chance that these comments may have been recorded inaccurately.

Finally, this audit explored feedback timeliness, but feedback quality is of equal importance. Future attempts to analyse assessment feedback should attempt to evaluate this parameter.

Conclusion:

In this first ever College-wide attempt to assess adherence to recent Feedback Policy, feedback timeliness was largely in keeping with the timescales stipulated in the Policy for all Year 1 assessment. However, there is room for improvement in the communication to students around late feedback.