

# Queen Mary Academy

What does inclusive feedback look like at  
Queen Mary?

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# Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings of a Learner Intern research project conducted at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) to explore inclusive feedback practices and their impact on student experiences. The project aligns with QMUL's Strategy 2030, aiming to deliver an exceptional, inclusive education co-created with a diverse student body. Feedback, a crucial aspect of this strategy, holds significant influence over student attainment and engagement. However, while vital, feedback remains an area of discontent for many students.

The project's goal was to investigate learners' perspectives on feedback, focusing particularly on inclusivity.. Through a qualitative approach and research conducted via a focus group of participants from all Faculties, the research delved into the forms, formats, effectiveness, and timeliness of feedback. Insights from this approach were analysed thematically alongside existing literature to draw conclusions and recommendations for enhancing feedback practices at Queen Mary.

Findings from the research show that students are aware of the usefulness of feedback and see effective feedback as instrumental in supporting their growth. They highly value specific, personalized feedback that highlights both their strengths and areas for improvement. Feedback was deemed more beneficial when formative and aligned with learning progression, while the timeliness of feedback was considered crucial for its usefulness.

Participants highlighted many examples of good practice, and made recommendations for areas needing improvement in their view. They emphasised the need for a more inclusive feedback process, in particular through accommodating student voices and opinions, allowing for dialogue, and valuing diverse perspectives. Accessibility of support was felt to be critical.

**Recommendations** included:

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- Ensure specific and personalized feedback, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.
- Establish a dialogue mechanism for students to discuss feedback and seek clarifications.
- Clarify a standardized feedback policy with clear deadlines to provide consistency.
- Consider using a checklist encompassing key elements of effective feedback.

The study concludes that peer-to-peer feedback may be a way forward, acknowledging the importance of student involvement in shaping the feedback process, and it offers a short checklist for educators to enhance feedback.

## Checklist for Educators:

When providing feedback to students, educators may consider these questions to help guide and write feedback effectively.

1. Is the feedback detailed enough?
2. Does the feedback give practical steps on how to apply the feedback?
3. Is the feedback given within a specific time frame?
4. Are there measures in place for learners to discuss the feedback with you?
5. Does the feedback mention the work's strengths and weaknesses?

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## Rational and aim of research

The [Queen Mary Strategy 2030](#) outlines how 'we will deliver an outstanding, inclusive, world-class education and student experience, co-created with our diverse student body, enhanced by our world-leading research and latest technological developments ". Within the four pillars of excellence for education and the student experience that support this strategy, Queen Mary identifies how we will strive to ensure that 'Assessment and feedback is focused, streamlined, aligned with progressing learning and supportive of students realising their academic potential.' This project can clearly be mapped to both institutional strategic elements.

There is ample evidence in educational research and literature that high-quality feedback is key to students' attainment (Hattie and Timperley 2007) while at the same time this is one of the areas where students are least satisfied (as evidenced for example through the National Student Survey across sector). From the point of view of inclusive practice, feedback – and more specifically the way in which the feedback moment is engaged with by educators and learners – plays an important role in questions of well-being, belonging and social justice (McArthur 2020), often becoming a negative moment in students' learning experience (Winstone and Carless 2019). This project contributes to research on how assessment feedback can be rethought as an inclusive, co-created act where student agency is foregrounded.

The aim of our research was to explore how learners at Queen Mary experience feedback and what, for them, makes feedback a positive, or negative experience, focusing in particular on questions of inclusivity. Through the use of a focus group, we gained a picture of learners' perceptions and ideas as to what would help improve their experience. This provides insights for educators at Queen Mary when exploring how to enhance their practice to support learners to achieve their potential. This research builds on existing work done at the University on feedback (in particular [the feedback toolkit](#)).

## Research methodology

### Research question

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**What does inclusive feedback look like at Queen Mary?**

### Methodology

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For this project qualitative data was collected via one focus group made up of 9 Learners representing all Faculties.

A simple 'expression of interest' sign-up form in Microsoft Forms was created for interested students. The Form provided a brief introduction to the project, including its aims, and an overview of the selection process based on establishing a spread of individuals from across the university.

The sample group of participants was selected from the 'expression of interest' Form through a non-probability method to establish learner voice from across Queen Mary.

Selected participants were contacted via email by the research team and invited to attend an on-site focus group meeting at the Department W campus.

The focus group questioning covered the following topics:

- What forms does feedback take in your programme?
- What format (electronic, in person, through email)

- Can you recall a moment when feedback was really helpful for you? (i.e. you were able to use it for future tasks)
- What made it useful?
- Are there moments when you have felt that feedback was less helpful?
- What could make it more helpful?
- Do you consider some feedback formats to be more useful to you, and why?
- What would inclusive feedback mean to you?
- Can you give examples of inclusive feedback you have received?
- What guidance should we give educators and learners about ways and format to give feedback?

The focus group discussion was transcribed and thematic analysis was conducted by the Learner Intern, who based the recommendations on those findings as well as a literature review conducted prior to the focus group.

## Findings

The focus group was conducted on 17 March 2023. It lasted an hour and attended by students coming from across the University. A lot of students had many strong views on how feedback could be improved. One of the unexpected outcomes from this focus group session was that many of the participants had difficulty understanding how inclusivity relates to feedback. Inclusivity, in this case, relates to the accommodation of student voices and opinions on how feedback should be presented and be written. One of the reasons students may struggle with defining 'inclusive feedback' is that students perceive educator-generated feedback as something that is written and given to them by educators, rather than seeing it as an opportunity for dialogue. In this review, I will draw out results from the focus group and introduce recommendations in which this can be mitigated.

### When feedback is effective

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Participants all had very positive examples of effective feedback from their courses and were clear about how feedback contributes to learning. This shows that there is already good feedback practice across the University.

*'I think feedback is always important if you want to improve.'*

*'The comments I received were really helpful because I can improve the way I write (...) that's really valuable because that makes me aware of how I can close gaps'*

Participants noted that effective feedback may come from other students:

*'I remember, I was in one seminar. I was having a discussion and I was really passionate about the topic, but then was speaking too much and I didn't realise I was. I didn't notice myself I was speaking over people and stuff like that and one of the other students they called me up on it, they were like 'let other people speak' as I realized that I took note of that and then the next from then on I was always like a bit more, let everyone speak.'*

Effective feedback also indicates what goes well:

*An important part of feedback is to 'reaffirm that you're doing something well'*

Formative feedback was highlighted as particularly helpful:

*It helps with continuous learning and by the time we do the final essay, a lot of things we put into the essay have been done already and we already have feedback on it.*

*My marks improved because I used to do a lot of formative, not assessments, but some of the questions for my tutors and the feedback helped a lot for my marks.*

## Support services

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The role of support services was specifically mentioned during the focus group session, with students acknowledging their need to access DDS for support. This suggests some confusion on how to link DDS support with academic feedback.

This is confirmed by the work of Heather M. Hartman-Hall and David A. F. Haaga who have shown that many students with learning disabilities very rarely use academic support services (Hartman-Hall and Haaga, 2002: 263). Whilst this study was done in America, the results closely align with what was found for this research. This suggests that it is a common issue for students with learning disabilities to not utilise the academic support services that are given to them.

## Content of feedback

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With regards to feedback, some students described the fact that the feedback they were receiving as 'non-specific', preventing them from applying the feedback in the future as they couldn't identify the skills they needed to work on. Students in the focus group gave varying responses on what made feedback useful, one of the students said that one of the important parts of feedback is to 'reaffirm'.

*"Another important part of feedback is to just like reaffirm that you're doing something well, that's quite important cause if you're doing something but nobody tells you that you're doing well, you might alter and change it, cause you don't really see that being a benefit."*

From this, it becomes quite clear that students use feedback to understand their own skillset and their own strengths and weaknesses and appreciate feedback that is more personalized and more specific, giving suggestions on how to improve in the future. This confirms good practice advice, which stresses that feedback should use direct examples of the student's work to justify their reasoning. If the marker is aware of who the student is, they should suggest practical ways to improve based on what they know the student is capable of. When organising feedback, Hattie and Timperely (2007: 88) argue that one needs to 'provide information specifically relating to the task or process of learning that fills a gap on what is understood and what is aimed to be understood'. This will ensure that the student is able to comprehend what specific steps they will need to take to act on the feedback and ensures that the content of the feedback is organised well. This will help the feedback to become more useful.

Queen Mary has a [designated toolkit, with a section that helps educators give and design feedback](#).

## Timelines of feedback

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A lot of the participants were interested in learning that different Schools within Queen Mary had different approaches to the deadline to give feedback. Participants raised an issue with how there isn't a set deadline when it came to feedback for their assignments. This becomes a question of inclusivity as those perceived disparities mean that students appear to be less informed on when they will be receiving feedback.

*“From my home school, XXX, it’s okay, that’s three weeks. But, in YYY, I don’t think it’s really that consistent. It depends on the module and the teacher.”*

The inconsistencies between deadlines to give feedback was something that was flagged up by participants. This need for consistency and timeliness is confirmed by Kathleen T. Brinko (1993: 584) who has said that what makes feedback useful is its relevance and for feedback to be relevant, it should be delivered in ‘timely fashion’. Ensuring participants are able to get their feedback as early as possible allows them to use that feedback for their future assignments. Also, when students are then aware of when their feedback will be coming, this will give them time to organise themselves and their schedule so they can dedicate time to improving their academic performance.

## Applying the feedback

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When asked what made feedback useful, one participant reflected on their experience with unhelpful feedback and said this:

*“It’s just like very broad overarching, non-specific. So, then you can’t really build up or do anything from that feedback.”*

From this, feedback becomes useful when it helps students build up their skills. In some cases, the feedback being received from students may give only give brief descriptions of their overall performance rather than focus on what they can do in the future. In some cases, lack of clarity meant that the students felt that the feedback was not helpful.

Furthermore, one participant asked that there needed to be more discussion on the feedback they were given so that it improves their understanding of the feedback.

*“So maybe having a tab or like a space or something where you can also kind of like ask for more details because the feedback is very like unidirectional once it’s given to you that’s it. So, there’s no way you can ask like what do you mean what is this so having that kind of like opportunity to get deeper more wider and think that would be better.”*

QMPlus has a comment system that is very rarely used for feedback. One way forward would be to use the comment system to encourage a dialogue between educators and students and to understand what they took from the feedback and how they plan to apply it.

## The types of formats for feedback

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When discussing which format should feedback be provided, there was a variety of responses. Electronic feedback was said to be more accessible as students enjoyed having to access the feedback from the comfort of their home. Participants also noted that different formats work for different assignments. One participant noted that with regards to in-person examinations, they would prefer in-person feedback as ‘directly’ after doing the exam ‘you get some feedback’, and with assignments like essays ‘online feedback is better.

Furthermore, participants applauded the advice and feedback hours system, however they noted because of the student’s busy schedule, the system has been underused. Below, is a participant’s response on why students do not use Advice and Feedback hours.

*“I think it’s...I think it’s partly the issue is like people are so busy with other things. Yeah, so again, it’s an issue where it’s not it’s really accessible”*



Students also noted that whilst accessibility is an important component when giving feedback, the use of advice and feedback hours is also underused because students are expected to use their own initiative to seek feedback, rather than it being offered as a matter of course.

## Recommendations

In order to resolve the issues stated above, we came up with the following recommendations:

### 1. **Specific and personalised feedback**

Educators should ensure that feedback is specific and more detailed, allowing students to improve their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Feedback should be personalized, with the educator pulling out examples from the student's work to show their strengths and weaknesses.

### 2. **There should be a dialogue about feedback**

In order for students to understand and ask questions on why they have been given the type of feedback, there should be a system in place that would allow students to converse with the educator. The QMPlus system has a comments system that allows students to write comments on the assignment they were given, it is recommended that educators use this platform or other options to allow students to ask for clarifications on the feedback they were given.

### 3. **Feedback policy**

For every school, the student should be aware of the feedback policy and the time it takes for them to get feedback. There should be a timeframe that every educator has when giving feedback so that students are aware when feedback is given to them, Students should be informed when feedback is going to be delayed and the reasons why.

### 4. **Integrating sources of support**

To address students' confusion about how to use different sources of support, more discussions with students about how to use feedback are recommended, so that they understand how to link academic work with DDS support when it comes to acting on feedback. In some cases, Schools may choose to link more closely with support services to ensure that students receive consistent advice.

### **Checklist for Educators:**

When providing feedback to students, educators may consider these questions to help guide and write feedback effectively.

- Is the feedback detailed enough?
- Does the feedback give practical steps on how to apply the feedback?
- Is the feedback given within a specific time frame?
- Are there measures in place for learners to discuss the feedback with you?
- Does the feedback mention the work's strengths and weaknesses?

## Conclusion

Participants were very appreciative of the feedback received, and could see its value. They gave many examples of good practice at Queen Mary. However they also suggested some areas for improvement to encourage more dialogue around feedback with educators. It was notable that they found it difficult to define what inclusive feedback might mean, which suggests that they didn't feel they had a voice in the process. Ensuring more of a dialogue, and students' involvement in feedback, will help with inclusivity. Peer-to-peer feedback may be a way forward.

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