

# EXAMINING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH FEEDBACK IN OPEN DISTANCE AND E-LEARNING: THE VIEWS OF THE STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

If virtual assessment lies at the heart of the open, distance and e-learning experience, then information about student responses to the assessment is vital. Feedback is generally thought of as being conveyed by the e-tutor to the student; however, the feedback mechanisms ecosystem demonstrates that student-to-lecturer and student-to-institution are also vital types of feedback. The study followed the mixed method approach to investigate the perceptions of 148 students in the Department of Educational Management universities in South Africa. Of the participants, 143 responded to questionnaires, and the remaining 5 were interviewed by means of a semi-structured interview schedule. The findings indicate that e-tutors did provide feedback to their students, and also that the efficient provision of effective feedback is essential to student learning and continues to be a key concern for many higher education institutions. However, the study also revealed that e-tutors provided conventional, one-dimensional assessment feedback, with negative consequences for teaching and learning. It is recommended that e-tutors should give feedback that encourages students rather than expressing criticism.

**Keywords:** assessment, art of virtual, e-learning policies, open distance and e-learning, pedagogic perspective, student feedback

## INTRODUCTION

The open distance and e-learning (ODEL) system relies on student support services as a means to ensure effective teaching and learning. Student support services comprise a range of services and strategies adopted in the presentation and delivery of courses so as to equip students with the skills and knowledge they need for the successful completion of their studies (Weaver 2006). ODeL uses technology, counselling, peer group support, administrative support, tutoring, and feedback measures to achieve success (Ukpo 2006).

Research over the past two decades has witnessed a remarkable shift from other student support services in higher education to feedback measures. Feedback in higher education has been defined as a process in which students make sense of information about their performance

and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies (Henderson et al. 2018). In terms of this definition, feedback in higher education has been considered vital in the assessment and evaluation of student performance. However, more contemporary definitions place feedback in a context beyond performance, and view it more broadly as relating to students' understanding and progress at a particular point in time, and the means by which students gauge their progress in terms of the knowledge, understanding and skills that will determine the successful completion of their course (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Scott et al., 2014).

Sources of feedback can be either formal or informal. In a formal context, the e-tutor is seen as the sole contributor to the feedback process. However, valuable feedback is also received from peers, advisors, other members of the public and parents (Carless and Winstone 2020). Whatever feedback the e-tutor provides must be communicated clearly in order to bridge the gap between the e-tutor's understanding and expectations and those of the students (Hounsell 2007). Thus, feedback from the e-tutor on a student's assessment needs to culminate in a shared understanding of quality in that particular context. If it is to facilitate learning and support students on their journey through the course, the feedback must be well formulated and adequately understood (Sadler 2010).

Therefore, feedback within the ODeL system will provide a platform for meeting students' needs. However, the question to be answered is whether the feedback platform in the ODeL system is sufficiently effective in providing the support that students require in order to complete their studies successfully. The study reported in the present article was undertaken to explore the capacity of the ODeL system in South Africa to provide quality feedback, since distance learning provides fewer opportunities for students to ask questions for clarification at any particular time. The study aimed to arrive at improved feedback mechanisms in support of more effective education and to review ODeL feedback practices in the country. When planning feedback comments, e-tutors should consider giving holistic feedback that guides students to improve, motivates them and contributes towards the success of their studies. E-tutors should also make provision for feedback from students.

## **AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The main aim of the study is to improve feedback mechanisms in support of more effective education in ODeL feedback practices in the country. The following specific objectives were followed in achieving the aim of the study:

- To examine the use feedback on assignments by students in an ODeL institution.
- To identify the type of communication and feedback employ by e-tutors in an ODeL institution in the country.
- To examine the effectiveness of feedback from e-tutors to students in an ODeL institution.
- To determine the feedback preference of students in an ODeL educational institution.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Feedback has been an integral part of face-to-face education in traditional higher education systems; however, with the introduction of ODeL, it has become increasingly important. In the ODeL system, students have greater autonomy and regulate and control their own learning to a greater degree (White 2005). Students are expected to develop cognitive and critical thinking capabilities so as to work through the study material properly and effectively. Feedback has become an important tool in enabling students to take responsibility for their learning, achieve autonomy and succeed in their studies (Hounsell 2021). Research since the early 1990s has witnessed a remarkable shift from other student support services in ODeL to feedback measures. Feedback in the ODeL context has been defined as a process in which students make sense of information relating to their performance and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies (Henderson et al. 2018). On the basis of this definition, feedback in higher education has been described as vital in the assessment and evaluation of student performance.

However, more contemporary definitions place feedback in a context beyond performance and view it more broadly as relating to students' understanding and progress at a particular point in time, and how students gauge their progress in terms of the knowledge, understanding and skills that will determine the successful completion of their course (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Scott et al. 2014). Nicol (2010) describes feedback as two-way communication between an e-tutor and a student with the purpose of both receiving and constructing input. According to Hounsell (2021), feedback is a "feed-forward" process that supports learning. Hence, feedback has no single definition, but is a multidimensional tool employed during the student's academic journey.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The role of feedback in ODeL**

In line with the complexity of its definition, feedback has multiple roles to play in an ODeL institution and any other higher institution. It is important in ODeL because it fulfils a

pedagogical role. It serves as a channel for detailed commentary relating to both structure and content so as to consolidate student learning.

Feedback has been accepted as being synonymous with assessment, in that it is used to inform a student's performance or report on the degree of correctness with which a task has been completed. Hattie and Timperley (2007) state that feedback is the result of student performance or understanding of the study materials provided, while Nicol (2010) and Sadler (2010) argue that feedback has gone beyond simply giving information about the degree of correctness or incorrectness of a student's answers, and that it is in fact a reciprocal process involving the exchange of constructed knowledge, to the benefit of the student. Price et al. (2010) concur, stating that the purpose of feedback information is to reinforce, correct, and serve a benchmarking purpose. As already stated, feedback has been described by Hounsell et al. (2008) as a feed-forward process that supports learning. The implication is that whatever the form that feedback takes, its ultimate aim is to provide information or knowledge that enhances the learning capability of the student.

Walker (2009) expresses the view that feedback must be engaged enough to trigger and develop critical skills so that the student is able to understand the assignment given. In other words, feedback alerts the student to any mistakes made, making it possible to correct them, and provides new information or detailed answers to a particular problem and an indication of how it can be resolved in the future.

### **The use of feedback by students**

As important as feedback is in ODeL system, the response of students to the feedback is a determinant of its effectiveness, since it is a two-way process (Hounsell 2021). Students respond in a variety of ways to feedback from their e-tutors: while some use the feedback strategically, others are more concerned with the marks awarded, and do not read through the comments provided. A study conducted by Kreonidou and Kazamia (2019) revealed that most students respond positively towards feedback, in that they pay attention to the content and apply it strategically so as to benefit from it in future situations. Segoe (2013), however, makes the observation that in some instances lecturers do not give feedback on students' assignments, or that when they do, it is late, and arrives after the students have written their examination. In such cases students do not get the opportunity to utilise the feedback, and it is of no use to them.

### **Two-way communication between student and e-tutor**

In order for feedback in the ODeL system to achieve any benefit, communication in the form of discussion between students and e-tutors of the outcomes of assessment is very important. It

is therefore crucial for students to engage with their e-tutors to seek clarification and raise their concerns. Research shows that students tend not to engage with their e-tutors about feedback (Kreonidou and Kazamia 2019). However, those students who engaged in communication did so when they were dissatisfied with their marks, not to discuss their performance and ways to improve it. This study bore out the results of an earlier study suggesting that the majority of students do not seek extra clarification from their lecturers (Black and McCormick 2010). Segoe (2013) points out that the communication is usually a one-way process, and this is because e-tutors do not give students enough time to go through the course content with them. The e-tutors thus do not create a conducive environment for a two-way feedback system.

### **Effectiveness of feedback**

If it is to serve any purpose at all, feedback needs to be effective. Feedback is meant to reinforce students' understanding and help them correct their mistakes; however, if it falls short in this, it is no longer effective. Quality feedback encourages students and is effective, whereas mediocre feedback discourages students and is ineffective (Hounsell 2021). Studies show that in most instances students consider feedback to be ineffective. According to Walker (2009), students consider feedback to be effective only when it contains helpful comments that guide them towards areas of improvement, provide motivation and help them pass their examinations. This was confirmed in the study carried out by Kreonidou and Kazamia (2019), where it was found that most students considered feedback ineffective in motivating them and guiding them towards passing their examinations. Segoe (2013) confirms that in most instances lecturers do not give corrective feedback to their students, and do not provide them with guidance on how to rectify their mistakes. Students then simply ignore the feedback.

### **Feedback preference of students**

There is standard feedback in open distance and e-learning. Howard (1987, 33) recommends that in designing feedback, the e-tutor needs to consider the feedback content, the degree of individualisation, the timing and the feedback format used. Wilkinson (2003) observes that the feedback should contain comments that contribute to students' understanding of the learning content. Wion (2008) argues that feedback must focus on the cognitive development of the student, while Walker (2009) contends that the feedback must consist of constructive comments on students' writing so as to guide and enhance their performance and writing skills development (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Howard (1987) advises that individual evaluation of students' performance must form part of feedback, and Chung, Shel, and Kaiser (2006) express the view that individualised feedback promotes self-regulated learning among

students, because students are motivated once they see their marks.

Various researchers have indicated that time is of the essence in feedback (Segoe 2013; Styer 2007), and Segoe (2013) warns that delayed feedback offers no benefit and serves no useful purpose. Quality feedback helps students to develop a sound argument. Students must be able to report that they have greater confidence in their ability to argue a case and support their own perspective on their areas of study. Feedback should provide what each student needs in order to develop. The study conducted by Kreonidou and Kazamia (2019) indicated that students prefer signposted comments on their actual assignments that provide explicit guidance and direction and that they value suggested answers by their e-tutors, while a study conducted by Segoe (2013) at the University of South Africa revealed that students welcome feedback that enhances learning and gives advice on how to rectify mistakes, and shows respect to students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The research approach**

The study was situated in the context of the ODeL educational system, and focused on students studying towards a postgraduate certificate in teaching. A mixed method approach to data collection was adopted for the purpose of obtaining answers to the research questions.

### **Participant selection**

The target population for the study consisted of students enrolled for a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) programme at an open university in South Africa. This included all students writing their dissertation in school management and having spent two years on their studies. A total of 148 students were selected by means of non-probability sampling. The first student was identified through an Open University database, and the remainder were chosen through convenience or snowball sampling because they were too few in number to be sampled by means of rigorous probability sampling. The researcher was clear about the subjectivity inherent in snowballing; however, the numbers suggest that a fair representation in terms of the numbers might have been achieved. Narrowing down the population to students writing their dissertations on the subject of school management of itself reduced the sample to an appreciable number. In all, 143 participants responded to the questionnaires and additional 5 answered questions during an interview conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule.

### **Data collection**

Data for the study was collected using two principal instruments. Quantitative and qualitative

tools were used in combination. The quantitative tool comprised a web-based self-designed questionnaire consisting of 25 close-ended multiple-response and 5-point Likert scale questions. The questions were sub-divided into categories so as to respond to the specific objectives. The questionnaires were sent to the participants via the WhatsApp application on their mobile phones. All the respondents except one had this application. In all, 143 completed questionnaires were received and analysed.

The qualitative part of the study consisted of an interview schedule consisting of five open-ended questions prepared so as to obtain further clarity on the data from the questionnaires. The interview was held telephonically. The five participants were given the questions in advance to allow them to consider their responses. The interview session with each participant lasted a maximum of 45 minutes.

### Data analysis

The returned questionnaires were collected and examined, and the data entered into SPSS version 25.0, after which descriptive analysis was performed. The responses from the interviews were transcribed and reported verbatim.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 1. The use of feedback on assignments

Student response to feedback was examined by means of five Likert scale statements and responses, as shown below.

**Table 1:** Response to feedback on assignments

	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
I look at the overall mark first	72	50,3
I look at the marks for each marking criterion first	3	2,1
I read the written comments first	2	1,4
I compare the feedback comments with the assignment	5	3,5
I do all the above one after the other	61	42,7
<b>Total</b>	<b>N = 143</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 shows that the majority (72, or 50.3%) of the respondents stated that they focused on the assignment marks; however, a sizeable number (61, or 42.7%) stated that they followed all the five suggested steps. Three (2.1%) of the respondents indicated that they looked at the marks for each marking criterion first, while only 2 (1.4%) considered reading the comments first, and only 5 (3.5%) stated that they compared the feedback comments with the assignment. This

analysis suggests that most students are more concerned with the marks than the comments, even though some go through a detailed process of looking at the marks, reading the comments and comparing the comments with the assignment.

In the interviews the participants stated how they use the feedback. Participant 1 (P1) responded as follows: “I consult the feedback again and read through all the comments. I consider the comments one by one and try to avoid the same mistakes in my next submission”.

However, some participants did not consider the feedback comments to be important, and therefore ignored them. Participant 5 (P5) responded: “I start writing in my own way as feedback comments are not important because I don’t make any meaning out of it”.

## 2. Student–e-tutor communication

Objective 2 of the research related to understanding students’ perception of their communication with their e-tutors.

**Table 2:** Student–e-tutor communication

Statement	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
I contact the tutor immediately to discuss comments	5	3,5
I contact the tutor when my mark is not satisfactory	75	52,4
I contact the tutor to ask for advice on how to improve the assignment	15	10,5
I contact the tutor after reading over the comments again and again without understanding	48	33,6
<b>Total</b>	<b>N = 143</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 shows responses from students regarding communication and their response to feedback from their e-tutors. The responses indicate that the majority (75, or 52.4%) of students would contact their e-tutors only when they were not satisfied with their marks. Very few students (5, or 3,5%) contacted their tutors immediately to discuss the feedback, while 15 (105%) of the respondents contacted their tutor to seek advice on improving the assignment; contact between student and tutor became frequent when students failed to understand the comments from the e-tutor (48). The analysis reveals very little communication and interaction between students and e-tutors. There was no free communication between students and e-tutors, except when students were dissatisfied with their marks or did not understand some of the e-tutor’s comments. This also reveals that students did not have a relationship with their tutors and that some students felt uncomfortable contacting their tutors for further explanation or advice relating to their feedback.

In an interview, P5 stated: “I try to understand what went wrong by myself without contacting the tutor because I don’t really know what to ask her”, and P1 reported: “I feel



uncomfortable contacting the e-tutor for explanations, even though I don't understand certain comments and need extra explanations”.

### 3. Effectiveness of feedback

**Table 3:** Effectiveness of feedback

	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
It offers guidance to improve my written academic skills	15	10,49
It tries to correct the mistakes in my assignment by directing me to the right parts of the study materials	11	7,7
It involves enlightening comments that do not create further confusion	21	14,7
It encourages me to continue even if I did not do well	17	11,9
It clearly identifies areas that require improvement	36	25,2
It is helpful for me to pass the module	43	30,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>100</b>

With regard to the effectiveness of feedback, table 3 shows that most respondents (43, or 30,1%) agreed that the feedback helped them to excel in the courses. Of the respondents, 36 (25,2%) stated that feedback helped them to identify areas of their assignment requiring improvement, while 15 (10,49%) agreed that feedback offered guidance on improving their written academic skills. Another finding from the data was that 17 out of the 143 respondents stated that feedback encouraged them to continue studying, even if the marks were not encouraging; 21 of the respondents stated that the feedback consisted of useful comments that did not create confusion, while another 11 respondents stated that the feedback served to correct their mistakes in the assignments by directing them to the appropriate sections in their study materials. The analysis implies that e-tutors' feedback comments were perceived by students to be ineffective when it came to correcting mistakes and directing them to the relevant parts of the study materials. While encouraging feedback was seldom given, the feedback comments usually clearly identified areas requiring improvement, and therefore helped students to pass their modules.

When asked to express their views on the effectiveness of the feedback received from tutors, the participants expressed diverse views regarding the comments they received. Participant 4 stated:

“The feedback seems impersonal making me feel unimportant for the e-tutor. It involves extra personal effort to understand. However, I must say that it helps me to improve my performance.”

### 4. Feedback preference

The analysis shows that students had a high expectation of feedback as a means of encouraging

them to study and bring out their potential. The majority of the respondents 64, (or 44,8%) were

**Table 4:** Feedback preferences

	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
I would like to be guided towards better academic writing skills	64	44,8
I would like to be given a suggested correct answer by the e-tutor	18	12,6
I would like to be encouraged more to contact the tutor for extra oral feedback	9	6,3
I would like my mistakes to be explained and corrected one by one	27	18,9
I would like the feedback to describe the strong parts of my arguments too	12	8,4
I would like every single mistake to be corrected	13	9,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>100</b>

of the view that feedback should provide guidelines for improved academic writing skills, as this would constitute valuable information for future assignments. Of the respondents, 27 (18,9%) stated that the feedback should point out their mistakes and explain the corrections. It was interesting that only a few respondents (9) would have liked greater encouragement to contact their tutors for extra oral feedback. There were 18 respondents (12,6%) who would have liked suggestions and answers relating to their assignments to be supplied, while 13 (9%) of the respondents would have liked every single mistake to be corrected. This analysis suggests that for these students the greatest concern was their academic writing skills, which had not been covered in the feedback; even though students were more concerned about the assignment marks, they would have liked academic writing to be covered.

The interview further revealed instances where late receipt of feedback had negative effects on students, with Participant 3 explaining: “Sometimes the feedback are received just some few days to the submission of the next assignment and this affects my preparation negatively”.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the descriptive analysis suggest that students respond to and use feedback in several ways. What is important is that every respondent mentioned that they had received some form of feedback, which provides an indication that most e-tutors do indeed provide feedback to their students, thus refuting the earlier assertion that some tutors do not provide feedback (Segoe 2013). The analysis showed that students do benefit from the feedback or other comments serving the intended purpose of helping them in their subsequent assignments. However, it would seem that students more often consult the feedback specifically to learn their marks, since only a few students considered reading the comments with understanding. The analysis suggests that some students who participated in the study are not utilising feedback

and taking responsibility for their learning, and this may affect their studies negatively. This result supports earlier research that suggests that some students use feedback strategically, while others concern themselves purely with the marks achieved and do not read through the comments provided (Hounsell 2021). The result is somewhat at odds with the assertion that most students have a positive attitude towards feedback (Kreonidou and Kazamia 2019). The students did not pay much attention to the other comments, probably because they felt that the previous feedback did not yield anything.

The analysis revealed that very little communication and interaction took place between students and e-tutors, except in instances where students were dissatisfied with their marks or did not understand some of the comments relating to their marks. Some students felt uncomfortable contacting their e-tutors for further explanation or advice relating to their feedback. This reveals that some participating students do not establish a relationship with their e-tutors and that they did not have the opportunity to benefit from interaction so as to receive further explanation from their e-tutors. The findings of this study bear out earlier reports that students do not engage with their e-tutors about feedback in an ODeL system (Kreonidou and Kazamia 2019; Black and McCormick 2010). The reasons for the one-way nature of the communication may include the inability of e-tutors to encourage students to interact with them.

The analysis suggests that tutors' feedback comments were perceived by students to be ineffective with regard to correcting mistakes and directing them to the relevant parts of the study materials. Feedback comments that provided insight and encouragement were seldom given, however, with the feedback comments usually focusing on identifying areas requiring improvement and helping students to pass their modules. The findings support the view that students consider feedback to be effective only when it contains insightful comments that guide students towards areas of improvement, provide motivation, and help them pass their examinations (Walker 2009; Segoe 2013). It is also evident that students who failed to adopt a holistic approach to reading the comments may not benefit from the feedback, and may consider it ineffective.

The analysis revealed that in the first instance, the students preferred feedback that offered guidance and provided an opportunity to improve their academic writing skills. Secondly, they preferred feedback comments on mistakes made and feedback that provided the correct answers one by one. However, students were least concerned about being encouraged to contact their e-tutors. Thus, even though the participants were more concerned about the assignment marks, they would have liked feedback about academic writing. The students also wanted to receive the feedback comments in good time so as to enable them to prepare for their next assignment. This bears out earlier studies indicating that quality feedback highlights students' points,

enables them to develop a sound argument, and enhances their performance and writing skills development (Kreonidou and Kazamia 2019; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Furthermore, Segoe's (2013) argument that students prefer feedback that offers advice on how to correct mistakes one by one was confirmed in the study.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been established generally that negative feedback reduces students' ability to improve their performance. Feedback should be considered a crucial component of student support and the learning strategy in the ODeL environment. It is recommended that in order to encourage students, e-tutors should avoid feedback that is humiliating. When planning feedback comments, e-tutors should consider giving holistic and insightful feedback, offer students guidance on how to improve, motivate them, and help them pass their examination. E-tutors should provide feedback that reflects students' academic writing abilities; furthermore, e-tutors must endeavour to provide feedback comments that contribute towards establishing a sound relationship between themselves and the students.

This study reflects the perception of students on feedback from e-tutors and I recommend further research on the views of e-tutors.

## CONCLUSION

The study explored the perspectives of students enrolled at ODeL institution in South Africa on feedback. Feedback fulfils a vital role as an intervention in the teaching and learning process in the ODeL system. It is very important in establishing quality of teaching and learning. Effective feedback is necessary not only for PGCE students but the undergraduate as well. It is therefore, imperative for e-tutors to provide constructive feedback comments to students. Secondly, the feedback must be timely and get to the students earlier enough to enable them prepare for their examination. However, the feedback is of higher value to teaching and learning when students maximise the opportunity from the constructive feedback.

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